

“The People’s Republic of Mirkwood”: Economic Subjectivity, Utopian Practice, and Play in an Intentional Community

by
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Abstract

What kinds of spaces do intentional communities create? How do everyday practices and interactions shape the lives of intentional community members? What can their participation in diverse economic practices tell us about contemporary avenues for resisting or subverting capitalist norms? What kinds of subjectivities are formed in such communities? These questions are inspired by theoretical works from scholars such as Ernst Bloch, J.K. Gibson-Graham, Kathi Weeks, and Donna Haraway, but also the everyday practices of becoming in which activists and community builders engage. In this thesis, I explore Mirkwood House members' experiences "becoming-with" as a community, engaging in diverse economic practices, and building utopian projects. I argue that these experiences reflect those of seriously playful subjects capable of long-term, enduring, dynamic experimentation and creation of other worlds, ones that make utopian projects not only possible, but pleasurable.

Keywords: community; diverse economies; utopia; subjectivity; play

For nerds, weirdos, and utopians

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2013, a fire broke out at Mirkwood, a house then inhabited by slightly more than 30 members of an intentional community in a small midwestern city in the United States. No one was hurt, and firefighters put out the flames fairly quickly. The larger cooperative network housed Mirkwood members for a brief time and mobilized other resources to provide for members while they found new accommodation. Many Mirkwood members expected to be back in the house in a few months, but it ultimately took over two years for members to be able to legally occupy the house. More than the fire itself, water damage from putting the fire out was extensive in an already very large, old, and somewhat haphazardly modified structure. In addition, because of the realization that renovation and rebuilding would take much more time and money than was expected, the larger cooperative network split over whether to keep the house going or to sell. This period is described by Mirkwood members as “the fight to save the house.” Though the house with the largest membership, Mirkwood was at this time and at many other times in its history somewhat of a black sheep in regard to other houses in the network. It was more lenient in membership, more anarchistic in its in-house cooperative structure and often politically, and was described to me as “the dirty little party house.” It was also the only house in the network that would consider letting me in as a researcher.

Despite, or I would argue, because of the “fight to save the house,” Mirkwood house and the larger cooperative network became more democratic and more resilient, though it continues to have conflicts as an ongoing project. Caleb describes the process as follows: “Every epic story, the thing that causes the epic, shakes all kinds of other shit out of the tree and we grabbed that tree and we shook it really, really hard.” Fiona says: “I’m still a little incredulous that we pulled this shit off. The amount of support and the amount of people involved. It’s like, you don’t know how people are going to react in a crisis and whether you actually have affinity with people. Are you going to be able to solve problems or not? Even some of the most dysfunctional people here really came through. So, in a crisis, zombie apocalypse, we’re fine. Bring it on!”

Along with my participants, I also say “bring it on!” Let’s build. This thesis is written against constant deconstruction of contemporary neoliberal capitalisms and for intrepidly going about the hard task of constructing new economic and social worlds, knowing that you will have to deconstruct further at times in order to construct better. This thesis is written for creative motion, work and play, toward a horizon of possibility. In this context,

I ask the following questions: what kinds of spaces do intentional communities create? How do everyday practices and interactions as part of these social spaces shape the lives of its members? What can their participation in diverse economic practices tell us about contemporary avenues for resisting or subverting capitalist norms? What kinds of subjectivities are formed in such communities? These questions are inspired by theoretical works from scholars such as Ernst Bloch, J.K. Gibson-Graham, Kathi Weeks, and Donna Haraway, but importantly also the everyday practices of becoming in which activists and community builders engage. Mirkwood members have built and rebuilt their physical and social space as a place for experimenting with modes of living, economic practices, and cooperative decision-making. They inhabit a position of tension between dominant neoliberal capitalist systems and alternative strategies: deconstruction and construction in on-the-ground utopian practice. A key thread I found running through the multiple practices employed by Mirkwood members to assert community economic imaginaries was the frequent use of play and playfulness. This thesis will focus on the role that play has in maintaining community feeling between members, experimenting and enacting diverse economies, addressing or eliding tension and conflict, and withstanding the dynamic, shifting, uncertain, and imperfect nature of utopian projects. This work contributes to scholarship on community itself, emergent strategies for disrupting capitalist norms, contemporary utopian projects, subjectivity in intentional communities, and the possibility for political practice through play.

Intentional Community in Context

For the working definition of intentional communities, I will use Fellowship for Intentional Community's (FIC) definition because it represents a commonly agreed upon articulation among cooperative communities in the US as they see it themselves: "Intentional communities' include ecovillages, cohousing, residential land trusts, income-sharing communes, student co-ops, spiritual communities, and other projects where people live together on the basis of explicit common values" (FIC 2018). For people seeking participation in intentional communities, there is an overt choice to live in greater than usual cohesion, physical and relational. Furthermore, their choice comes from a specific set of common values, normative ideas about what *should* be. For example, ecovillages practice "reduce, reuse, recycle," they may harvest rainwater and use renewable energy to fuel their efficient homes. Others more focused on economic justice

may practice sliding scale rent or have funds held as safety nets for members who are in need.

Some historical examples of Midwestern communal living in the United States include socialist Robert Owen's New Harmony, Indiana's "Community of Equality," and religious-based communes such as Shaker communities in Ohio. More recent experiments across the country beginning in the 1960s countercultural movements are often characterized as cults (some were), or merely derided (or glorified) as orgiastic communities of hippies. However, a wide range of communal living inspired by countercultural and social justice movements at the time existed, and Mirkwood House came to fruition during this era of experimentation. Unlike many others, it still operates today.

Mirkwood house exists in a small city in the Midwest with a large university. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, civil rights, women's rights, and anti-war movements were active there and fraternity and sorority numbers decreased. This gave activists and those in other kinds of countercultural communities the opportunity to take over some rather perfect real estate for communal living. Some began as squats and were eventually just given over to forming cooperatives, and some were purchased for low prices. In order to be able to purchase, however, the need for collective buying power became obvious. So, instead of individual cooperative houses struggling to find their places, they created a network to pool resources and collectively purchase multiple houses. Mirkwood began in 1975 and still exists, despite the recent, and deeply disruptive struggle to "save the house."

The most influential historical scholarship on intentional communities regards them as institutional entities in relationship to larger social forms and the intentional community as a whole is generally the unit of analysis. To explain why intentional communities proliferate at certain times, Benjamin Zablocki focuses on a large survey of intentional communities and argues "Communitarianism is a cultural response to cognitive and choice overload: it will occur when people find themselves overwhelmed by competing belief systems, value systems, and action alternatives" (1980:196). For Zablocki, intentional communities tend to swell in times of social confusion. In *Commitment and Community*, Rosabeth Kanter attempts to explain successful communities, which she defines based on longevity. She argues that successful communities are those that have clear boundaries and ask a lot of their members (Kanter 1972). Important in this conception are members' sense of transcending their

own individual existence, being part of something larger than themselves, and the ritual repetition of this sense over time. In *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Approach*, Love Brown et al look at the history of specific intentional communities in the context of the United States, though mainly highlighting religious or spiritual communities (2002). Much of this work uses Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* and liminality to explain the trajectories of these communities, which I discuss in more detail below.

More recently in the literature, there has been a much greater focus on intentional community internal dynamics and how they shape members. Part of this everyday experience can be seen in the language use overtly or subtly prescribed as part of community norms. In "Get Therapy and Work on It" Daphne Holden and Doug Schrock argue that the discourse of liberation psychology as observed in the community of Aurora Commons served to police newcomers to the community and create and maintain hierarchical relationships (2007). Jolane Flanigan argues that the use of "co," a gender-neutral pronoun, in the intentional community of Twin Oaks serves to subvert individual identity, assert communal identity, and reinforces feminist ideology (2013). Mark Kruger explains that East Wind community members use a language of harmony to describe the goal of justice and highlight the difference in their ideas of justice from mainstream society (2004). These examples of the use of specific discursive practices in communities illustrate how they shape and maintain member behavior and their relationship to larger community norms.

Other scholars focus on the larger visions of intentional communities and what that means for members' entanglement in the community itself and outside of it. For example, Carmen Kuhling argues that intentional communities often embody contradictory or mixed notions of difference and conformity to the status quo (2004). She looks at the New Age movement as a symptom of the limits of modern utopian narratives of progress such as science, reason, the environment, the political, community and identity. She focuses on what members bring with them into intentional communities rather than the goals of the established group. She argues that intentional communities have some contradictory expressions of belief and practice and embody a mixture of opposition toward the status quo and a simultaneous confirmation of it (Kuhling 2004:168). This tension between utopia and dystopia in intentional communities is an important aspect of member relationships and practices.

Methodology, Participants, and Positionality

The research method for this project was primarily participant observation. I stayed within the range of active and passive participation as opposed to detached observation, though the exact degree of involvement not only varies with different activities or sites, but at different sessions of fieldwork within the same context (Dewalt and Dewalt 2011). I also conducted semi-structured interviews using a person-centered approach (Hollan 2005). Contact and site-selection as well as permission to inhabit the site was conducted through email, phone, and Skype communication. It is important to be living in a house in the larger network rather than just going to events and meetings because in physical and everyday presence and interaction there are insights gained beyond just verbal description and language use. Using Maurizio Lazzarato's reading and application of Felix Guattari, I suggest that there are important non-discursive practices that contribute significantly to how members experience their participation in intentional communities (Lazzarato 2014). The research was conducted from October 2015 through January 2016. I returned in June 2016 for a final visit. My methods for collecting information were divided into three main areas: participant observation around the house and out with members, participant observation at events and meetings, and semi-structured interviews.

At the time of my fieldwork, there were 27 official adult members and 5 children, with the age of occupants ranging from 2 – 54 years old. It was requested that I generally refrain from including the children in my observations and analysis. The adult gender makeup consisted of 11 female-identified, 14 male-identified, and two gender-fluid or non-binary identified individuals. My observations were that, as in patriarchal society at large, men sometimes disproportionately dominated conversation in formal house meetings, while there seemed to be more gender parity in terms of oral expression in more informal, everyday settings.

The majority of members had been part of Mirkwood House prior to the fire, a few had joined from other cooperative houses in the area, and others were new to cooperative living. Members cited various reasons for joining Mirkwood house: specific financial need coupled with a need to be in walking or biking distance to work, desire for social belonging and acceptance, and ideological affinity with more communal social organization. Many members mentioned all three or a combination of these reasons.

The membership of Mirkwood House at the time was largely white, with only two identifying as people of color. This reflects the composition of the larger cooperative

network and highlights the relative privilege from which many members operated, while also attempting to address oppressive systems through participation in an intentional community. While creating sites of experimentation and hopeful construction of more just worlds, intentional communities still mirror pervasive power dynamics. For the purposes of this research project, while recognizing the interconnected, insidious nature of race and gender oppression, I have focused more on members' articulations of class and their relationship to specific diverse economic practices to understand this aspect of their utopian project.

I myself am a white woman with highly educated parents, also from the Midwest. This meant I was the same (privileged) race as most other members, could relate to some of the same regional colloquialisms, but did have some traditional class differences with many. I also lived in a cooperative house in another city before my studies and this sparked interest in how intentional communities, and specifically not only those in traditionally progressive areas of the United States, contribute to our understanding of possibilities for alternatives to capitalist economic relationships as well as how these experiences might shape members.

As a member of the house and community, I ate, slept, and worked at the house and other community spaces with members. These more informal interactions allowed me to see actual day-to-day practices rather than only stated goals and formal processes. There were semi-regular house meetings, which operated based on modified parliamentary rules and consensus decision-making. These settings provided insight into how community members interacted with each other in decision-making processes and how they dealt with organization/institutional conflict. In addition, I conducted 6 semi-structured interviews in the house, mostly in people's private rooms, or future rooms. This gave me a chance to hear from individuals without other members around and to get to know how particular members discussed themselves and Mirkwood. To respect the privacy of participants in this research, I have changed all personal names. I have also changed the name of the house (from one Elven place reference to another in J.R.R. Tolkien's fictional Middle Earth geography, as will be discussed in more detail below).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to frame my discussion of Mirkwood House, I will look at four key elements. First, I will look at theoretical frameworks around community itself. Then, I will explore relevant notions of political economic change, of which intentional communities are often explicitly in response. Thirdly, I will explore concepts of utopianism and its practice through which intentional communities and their members may be understood in Ernst Bloch's terms as "building into the blue, building [them]selves into the blue" (Bloch 2000:3). Bloch uses this image of construction with an unknown outcome to emphasize an orientation to the future and to contingent possibility for new becoming in utopian practice in his reading of Marx and others. Finally, I will discuss play in order to understand how Mirkwood members find ways to maintain their utopian practice. Scholarship on members in an intentional community practicing diverse economic relationships contributes to knowledge in the areas of political economic change, community, and utopian studies, and play by focusing on the mundane and intimate ways that members shape and are shaped by their concrete social and economic practices. This gives us insight into at least one way that individuals and communities attempt to stay the course in building better worlds.

Community Itself

Though I have chosen a certain definition for intentional communities and Gibson-Graham have a fairly clear conception of what a community economy entails, the term "community" itself is not without issue. In *The Inoperable Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy argues that community is neither a collection of separate individuals nor a unitary social substance. "The community that becomes a *single thing* (body, mind, fatherland, Leader...) ...necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness. The truth of community, on the contrary, resides in the retreat of such a being." (1991:xxxix). This retreat implies an analogous retreat from pre-planned, programmatic solutions to modernity's alienating individualism as well. Gibson-Graham explicitly use this concept in their description of community economies of difference (2006:85-86). Maurice Blanchot posits the individual's incompleteness as wanting contestation in the other that is in community, whether of two or many (1988:6). Roberto Esposito traces an alter-history of community through thinkers from Hobbes to Bataille and argues that

community is ultimately a void (2010:144-145). For Esposito this is a non-having, a lack of something, that connects people, much as in Nancy and Blanchot, where the mortality of the human constitutes a “community of the dead”, a community of lack, of possible nonexistence that is shared. Intentional communities could be seen as directly experimenting with forms of individual/other relationships, that have the potential to be in practice quite singular or in a “being of togetherness,” but also with the potential to make a place for “being-in-common,” engaging in dynamic processes that are characterized by motion rather than stasis; wrestling or dancing with/in the indeterminate space between the individual and community.

These paradoxical notions of community and the individual find a more concrete articulation in Victor Turner’s *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. In a nod to the importance of emptiness in the constitution of community, Turner mentions an analogy to the wheel where the emptiness in the center is critical to its wheel-ness (2008:127). Turner expands on Van Gennep’s process of separation, transition, and reincorporation, focusing on the transitional stage of liminality. Turner argues that in the liminal phase, participants are no longer a definite part of the normal social fabric and represent the unknown, darkness, and wilderness (2008:95). Participants are separated from normal social functioning and Turner argues that the outcome of this is “communitas.” Communitas is a feeling of common experience between liminal subjects and is characterized by egalitarian values and humility (2008:96). Yet Turner recognizes in this stage “powers of the weak” (2008:102-103). What he means by this is the power in the destabilization of social hierarchy that communitas generates and argues that the “wildness” of liminality is fertile ground for subversion and change that can ripple through the rest of society. One particularly significant aspect of Turner’s theory is that Van Gennep’s three-part process is somewhat inevitable. While he recognizes a way for lasting change, the agent of that change inevitably reverts to reintegration and loses its power of communitas, or the successful community necessarily must maintain a consistent generation of liminality (Turner 2008:126-127,139). Therefore, the communal feeling that maintains authentic egalitarian community is difficult, if not impossible to institute, because that very institution renders it not so subversive, no longer liminal. This is a challenge to the missions of many intentional communities and really anything purporting to be “community-based.”

As the ritual process defines roles, Mary Douglas’s concepts of purity and pollution are also relevant in our discussion of how community is constituted through

inclusion and exclusion. In *Purity and Danger* (2002), Douglas uses the concepts of purity and pollution, identified as being a crucial part of every society, as a frame in which to understand cultural norms and human behavior creating and responding to those norms. Douglas's core argument that dirt, defined broadly, represents "matter out of place," must be rejected/ejected to maintain order. "Dirt" represents that which threatens disorder, and ideas of what is and is not pure/polluting mirrors notions of *who* is pure/polluting to a given society (2002:44). Applied to intentional communities, we can see that membership selection itself is a way of keeping order by deciding who will or will not "pollute" the social fabric, who doesn't fit in to the overarching goals of the community. But also, intentional communities often seek to address "dirt" either by representing a place where those rejected may live together, or rejected ideas about living can have a place to operate. Douglas says of anomalies, "Negatively, we can ignore, just not perceive them, or perceiving can condemn. Positively, we can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place" (2002:48). Intentional communities may serve to enforce ignorance, they may mobilize mass/group condemnation, or they may deal with difference directly, perhaps providing a new way to include it as valued.

Miranda Joseph tackles the nonsubversive aspects of institutional deployments of the concept of community in contemporary life in *Against the Romance of Community* (2002). She argues that the notion of community is idealized and is often implicated in oppressive capitalist exploitation (2002:ix). Further, Joseph states that any notion of "community" inherently entails exclusion and invokes relationships of power, and so is grounds for reproducing inequality that mirrors and helps to continually remake not only class power dynamics, but a wide variety of hierarchical relationships (2002:xxii). The active selectivity of intentional communities certainly harbors this potential and is one danger of experimentation with alternative forms of living.

In a similar vein, Andrea Muehlbach uses her work in *The Moral Neoliberal* to argue that community voluntarism allows the retreat of government from social service providence. Community becomes complicit by creating moral neoliberal subjects that have a duty to care for those in need in their community, though this notion of voluntarism excludes some from being identified as moral subjects, such as immigrant care workers (2012:104-105, 210). While this activity is nonmarket-based, it ultimately serves capitalist ends in allowing the retreat of the state. There is this potential in intentional communities as well, the insidiousness of dystopic forms of community, as

seemingly benevolent faces of, and importantly pleasant personal experiences of oppressive processes.

When individuals, who according to Nancy and others are always non-singular, engage overtly in “community” there is potential for utopian practice and dystopic outcomes. This is because of the irreducibility of the subjects’ experience and an intentional community’s cohesion to a singular being, one trajectory. We can further explore this notion by studying intentional communities in particular because of members’ entanglement in both capitalist and noncapitalist economic practices and relationships.

This tension is what Donna Haraway might call, “staying with the trouble.” In her eponymous work, she describes staying with the trouble as “not a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway 2016: 1). Similar to Nancy, Haraway discusses “becoming-with” as a “task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (1). She also uses the term “sympoiesis,” meaning systems that are collectively produced without boundaries or central control, with the potential for surprise (Dempster in Haraway 2016:33, 61). Intentional communities often make “oddkin,” as Haraway calls them, by making family out of non-blood related members in community who are intentionally trying out multiple practices of learning to live together in a messy present, one filled with embedded multiplicities and contradictions. Intentional communities that can “stay with the trouble,” are those that remain a venue for experimenting with other worlds through utopian practice.

Political Economy

Intentional communities are in many cases a direct response to a feeling of alienation as a result of capitalist individualism. The attempt to debunk the idea of a rational, isolated individual and free market capitalism itself is a project that has been going on for a century at least. Marcel Mauss’s theory of the gift and the rule of reciprocity is particularly salient in the context of intentional communities (1954). Mauss uses ethnographic work including literature on the Kula Ring and Potlatch to argue that gift giving is the central form of exchange in “archaic” societies contrary to Western notions of a Primordial Economic Man. This means that economic life is based on the principle of reciprocity. Human relationships and social forms are the central motivation

for determining value and engaging in exchange. While not explicitly engaging with Mauss, many intentional communities seek to reinstate versions and hybrids of gift economies and other non-market forms of exchange.

Similarly, the “moral economy” concept asserts that social value norms were and are involved in economic decision-making. The term has been subject to several interpretations since its first significant use by E.P. Thompson and James Scott (Edelman, Fassin ed. 2012:55). Thompson, in describing the food riots of English families of the working poor, says:

It is of course true that riots were triggered off by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, baking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action. (1971:78-79)

Moral economy in its original usage then refers to a more complicated matrix of relationships where what is right and wrong is determined not by the particulars of pricing, or even actual hunger, but cultural traditions of economic practice. This theory of moral economy opposes an ahistorical, static view of economic relationships. Both Thompson and Scott particularly focus on class conflict as the cause of change from more paternalistic and redistributive economic principles based on social ties and a common moral sense, to the modern capitalist ethos of rational economic man and autonomous market function (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976). This Marxian approach continues, but with somewhat different implications and trajectories in the current political economic conversation.

More recent discussions of social change engage with poststructuralism in combination with Marxian frameworks. I will focus on the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and J.K. Gibson-Graham because they represent theories which stem from similar Marxian lineages, but take quite different approaches to outlining a way forward from deconstructing neoliberal capitalism to constructing a different economic future.

Hardt and Negri’s overall project is to create an updated Marxist theoretical framework for social justice and global democracy. They posit a counter-Empire in what they refer to as “the multitude” which is born of the devolved, network power of Empire,

but has the ability to subvert it. Like Empire, the multitude is a network of difference, but with a common interest in resisting Empire (2005:100). The use of plural and singular here emphasizes the complexity of the multitude, but doesn't necessarily distinguish Hardt and Negri's concept from what they are attempting to override in this same statement: the multitude is multiple, but is a singular subject. Hardt and Negri stress that the coalescence of the multitude is made possible by what the singularities have in common, but what is this common interest? Does the whole world have the same idea of an enemy (presumably not because the whole world would encompass the enemy) and where is the line between the good Multitude and the bad Empire? The rulers of Empire are implicitly separate from the multitude somehow, but it is unclear just how or where Hardt and Negri draw this line.

Hardt and Negri put forward their concept of "the common," which they define as common production including material and importantly immaterial production (e.g. services rather than goods), along with "democratic, collective self-governance," though what that means in particular is not clear (2009). It is the common that is meant to constitute the multitude that is also not a unity. They declare the common to be based on notions of love and then they proscribe and prescribe certain types of love (2009:162-163). This means that there can be diverse singularities, but they all have to conform in some way or another to the right kinds of love to effectively produce and maintain a democratic commons. These right kinds of love, according to Hardt and Negri, are contrasted to the "corrupt" love of the nuclear family, for example (Hardt and Negri 2009). This illuminates Hardt and Negri's attempt to transcend the local, the intimate, and force it into a global totality that is fairly nebulous and too big to begin to address concrete realities. While they wish to retain the dynamism of local difference in the multitude, they still do not allow this to be too self-determinedly different. They have a normative agenda in mind when they conceive of the subjectivity of the multitude.

Using Hardt and Negri's framework, we could describe intentional communities as localized units that contribute to the multitude by being spaces of common creation and maintenance. They are also many times conceptualized as different kinds of family, based on chosen connection and cooperation, rather than notions of the nuclear family conceptualized in materialist terms. However, Hardt and Negri do not seem to give much importance to local efforts that do not profess a global goal. Furthermore, they avoid the stickiness of concrete local realities and the possible intimate empowerment that this might entail, and assume a harmonized, if not unified, global entity.

For Gibson-Graham, any notion of a totalizing global economic power is misleading. They argue that conceptualizing economic activity as only thinkable in relationship to a one global, all-pervasive order, reinforces the power of the dominant capitalist mode. They make an effective analogy between the “vulnerable” female body as the earth and society, and penetrating capitalist economy as phallus. “Just as man is the universal subject and species standard of phallogocentric discourse, capitalism is positioned as the economic standard in the discourses I have called “capitalocentric” (Gibson-Graham 1996:35). Gibson-Graham remedy this by pointing to common, non-capitalist economic activities that turn out to be quite essential such as housework, sharing, and informal labor done without compensation (1996:7).

In *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Gibson-Graham elaborate this process and describe it as a politics of language, self, and collective action:

In constructing a discourse and practice of the community economy, what if we were to resist the pull of the sameness or commonness of economic being and instead focus on a notion of economic being-in-common? That is, rather than thinking in terms of the common properties of an ideal economic organization or an ideal community economy, we might think of the being-in-common of economic subjects and of all possible and potential economic forms. We might specify coordinates for negotiating and exploring interdependence, rather than attempting to realize an ideal. (2006: 86-87)

Here, Gibson-Graham invoke an active sense of community, which doesn't have a particular beginning or end, but is characterized by process, experimentation, and adaptation. Particularly relevant here is the transformation of self: the cultivation of new economic subjectivities through creation and participation in community economies (Gibson-Graham 2006:128-129,165). These new subjectivities are unintentionally and intentionally cultivated ways of being that are performed through human action and its creative potential within a community.

In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing explores multispecies collaboration amid the destruction capitalism has wrought and is continuing to perpetrate and how life might survive through this very collaboration. As part of this exploration, she critiques Gibson-Graham and says that “...what they call ‘non-capitalist’ forms can be found everywhere in the midst of capitalist worlds...But they see such forms as alternatives to capitalism. I would look for the noncapitalist elements on which capitalism depends” (2016: 65). She prefers to describe “sites for salvage [as] simultaneously inside and outside capitalism: I call them ‘pericapitalist,’” (2016: 63). By salvage, she means that which is coopted for the concentration of wealth, but is not under the

immediate control or production of capital, namely ecological processes. Tsing uses this lens to explore the ambiguity of sites in and out of capitalism and how they are “working the edge,” (2016: 61-70). However, Tsing’s conceptualization brings up similar issues as Gibson-Graham, though Gibson-Graham seem to be making a more overtly ambitious declaration of possibility through noncapitalist forms, while Tsing is more cautious about the ability of what she instead calls pericapitalist forms to be themselves particularly liberatory. Because intentional communities are also making some quite ambitious declarations of possibility in the way they are attempting to organize their lives, I will stick with Gibson-Graham as an appropriate characterization of the project of Mirkwood members.

Using Gibson-Graham’s framework, we can conceive of intentional communities as important sites creating more room for diverse economic activity, helping to create community economies through resource sharing, collective production, consensus decision-making processes and innovative models of providing each other with a quality of life. Intentional communities overtly create a space of diverse economic activity by modifying property relations and members of intentional communities also often explicitly seek to create themselves into new subjects that perform economic imaginaries in their intimate everyday lives. Intentional communities provide an immediacy, a way to be and importantly become “here now,” rather than a distant future dream of change, or a submission to a totalizing, inevitable force (Gibson Graham 2006:194).

Utopianism

The original term “utopia” comes from Thomas More’s eponymous work employing a clever pun using “eu” and “ou” Greek prefixes which refer respectively to “good” and “no”, combined with the root “topos,” meaning place. Thus for More, a utopia is paradoxically a good place that is no place. Though More invented the term, utopianism can be seen in any political philosophy that argues for what a proper society *should* consist of, from Plato’s *Republic* through Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Mill, and Rousseau. And the contradiction inherent in the term continues to play out in more recent political thought. We could include Hardt and Negri and Gibson-Graham in this group. Frederic Jameson says, “it is a mistake to approach Utopias with positive expectations, as though they offered visions of happy worlds” (2005:12), perhaps in contrast to the often-critiqued optimism of Gibson-Graham’s work. However, he further notes, “the Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that

no alternative is possible" (2005:232), concurring with Gibson-Graham's critique of capitalocentric narratives that leave no possibility for other worlds.

Ernst Bloch is a canonical thinker in what we might call the utopian lineage. Bloch emphasizes that utopia is never actually perfect and there is a place, even a necessity, for the melancholy of that reality, meaning that the realization of utopia's ironic imperfection should make one open to shifting, non-static, and multiple forms (1986:299). Bloch argues for a "work of mediation" that struggles with what he posits as the necessary contingencies and alternatives (and thus hope) in all phenomena, and the very real material constraints (1986:197). He bases this on several ontological concepts of anticipatory consciousness: the "Not-Yets" along with the "Front" and his notion of hope (Bloch 1986). In contrast to what he considers Freud and Jung's backward-only, past-based lens on the unconscious, Bloch argues for the Not-Yet-Conscious, "a relatively still Unconscious disposed towards its other side, forwards rather than backwards. Towards the side of something new that is dawning up, that has never been conscious before..."(1986:11). This phenomenon is for Bloch a key part of a kind of serious dreaming "beyond the day which has become" (10) towards and relating with the Not-Yet-Become, material in the present, not in the "cellar of consciousness", the remembered, but "on its Front," the horizon between dreaming and materiality, an approaching. He further describes this as "operat[ing] in the field of hope; so that this hope is not taken *only as an emotion*, but more essentially as a directing act, changing the cognitive course toward something other than. The imagination and the thoughts of future intention described in this way are utopian...in the newly tenable sense of the forward dream, of anticipation in general" (1986:12). This is the "utopian function" of dreaming and anticipatory consciousness (1986:142). The Not-Yet-Conscious is creative and generative and is the necessary basis for the Not-Yet Become (1986: 116). Taking Kathi Weeks's discussion of the Not-Yet-Become:

The ontology of what Bloch calls the 'Not-Yet-Become' affirms reality as a process that not only extends backwards, but also stretches forward: 'The Real is process,' the 'widely reified mediation between present, unfinished past, and above all: possible future' (I:196). According to Bloch's more expansive notion of reality, a notion that lies at the heart of the Not-Yet-Become and anchors his defense of utopianism, "anticipating elements are a component of reality itself" (I:197). In order to grasp the present, Bloch suggests that we must not only understand its emergences from and attachments to the past, but also attempt to grasp its leading edges and open possibilities; everything real has not only a history, but also a horizon. (2011:189).

What is important in all of this is that Bloch presents an ontological basis for the intentional community practice of experimenting with other forms of life, including but not limited to diverse economic practices. This assertion that a key part of reality and reality-making is imaginative and, importantly for Bloch, also about the making of the self, as he says, “To find it, to find the right thing, for which it is worthy to live, to be organized, and to have time: that is why we go, why cut new, metaphysically constitutive paths, summon what is not, build into the blue, *build ourselves into the blue...*” (2000:3).

The combination of Bloch and Jacques Derrida employed by Jason Kosnoski is also fruitful for looking at the experience of members of intentional communities. According to Kosnoski, both Bloch and Derrida are attempting to reimagine the Marxian political project and both employ failure and lack to present a vision for a more optimistic future (2011:508). Somewhat similar to Bloch, but in a much different focus, Derrida argues for a “work of mourning” that accepts the past and does not seek to push it away; a work that recognizes how the present is shaped by the past and will shape the future, even utopian projects (1994:119). Kosnoski asserts, “Through practicing the simultaneously frustrating yet liberating labor of investigating the possibilities for perfecting the world, individuals could cultivate hopeful utopian enthusiasm through experiencing techniques of unalienated labor, which they cannot gain through their actual, exploitative existence within capitalist society” and terms this a “work of utopia” combining Bloch’s “work of mediation” and Derrida’s “work of mourning” (2011:508). Engaging directly in these “techniques” is often a characteristic of member participation in intentional communities.

Lucy Sargisson looks specifically at intentional communities through a utopian lens in line with Bloch and others’ forward-looking, but sober account of the utopian project. She argues that estrangement is a core part of intentional utopian communities, and asserts that it is also “variously unendurable” (2007:393). For her, estrangement represents the outside, unknown, but also something close to alienation. She argues that estrangement is an integral part of utopian communities and serves to maintain a kind of ambivalence, which allows them to “function critically” (Sargisson 2007:394). This means that intentional communities’ distance from the mainstream, which may or may not include physical distance from urban centers, allows them to look freshly at habitual social forms. This ambivalence and outside-ness also makes things difficult. Physical distance creates material and practical issues and affective distance can lead to corruption and dystopic outcomes. But, insulation from the mainstream enables

vulnerable “experiments with the self” (Sargisson 2007:397). This gets more to the actual experience of intentional communities as complex entanglements where members engage in a tension between dynamic, shifting social and economic practices that shape their subjectivity.

In Kathi Weeks’s *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, the author’s main purpose is to show how we have taken work, meaning wage work, as a social given. Weeks argues for the politicization of work itself, meaning denaturalizing it and opening up the possibility for a postwork society. However, another major part of her book is the concept of the utopian demand. For Weeks, utopian demand “prefigures...a different world, one in which the program or policy that the demand promotes would be considered as practical and reasonable,” (Weeks 2011:176). Weeks uses Bloch’s concepts of Not-Yet-Conscious, Not-Yet-Become, and the Project of Hope to support her assertion of the utopian demand. But not only is the demand prefiguring, the act of demanding itself is an important political practice. The practice of prefiguring other worlds and demanding creates different subjects, ones who move from “a self to restore, to selves to invent,” (Weeks 2011:90). Weeks brings in Nietzsche as well in combination with Bloch to ultimately argue that their respective notions of resentment and hope, both affective and cognitive, help us understand that “the hopeful subject...is less an already constituted subject seeking revenge or restitution, recognition or vindication, than a constitutive subject armed not only with the desire to become stronger, but more provocatively, with the willingness to become different” (2011:204). Mirkwood members’ practices can be seen as conscious and unconscious inventing of these kinds of selves demanding and creating other worlds.

Play

Hope, provocation, demanding, creating, and particularly prefiguring diverse economic worlds in community is necessarily playful in a number of ways. Describing the tendency for scholars to think of play in binary terms of work and non-work as well as representative versus material terms, Thomas Malaby asserts play as a disposition and says with this approach, “play becomes an attitude characterized by readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendently ordered account” (Malaby 2009:206). This is remarkably similar to Gibson-Graham’s subversion of capitalocentric narratives and assertions of contingent, diverse economies; Nancy,

Blanchot, and Esposito's indeterminate and motion-based notions of community itself in the tension between individual and group; and certainly Bloch's forward-looking, contingent, and processual notions of utopia. In his statement on play from *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga states, "Civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come from play...it arises in and as play, and never leaves it (1971:173). Because society is dynamic, we are always already playing at it, creating, creating destruction, re-creating through experimenting, improvising, in concert with one another.

Clifford Geertz's famous article on Balinese cockfighting makes alternative use of Bentham's concept of "deep play," essentially play with such high stakes that no one would engage in it. Geertz argues that the deep play of Balinese cockfighting is high stakes, but also not utilitarian. It is an arena for enacting meaning-making through honor, dignity, and masculinity in Balinese culture. Geertz asserts this play is a "deeply felt, interaction of [certain] selves in everyday life" (1972:73). Similarly, Mirkwood members' maintenance of intentional community has some high stakes in preserving quality of life for those with low incomes, but also the high stakes in demonstrating viable alternatives to mainstream capitalist forms of living. While the cultivation of intentional community isn't actually a literal game like the Balinese cockfight, it is an experiment in which Mirkwood members play seriously at new worlds.

What Sherry Ortner has called "serious games" accounts for the social construction of life which defines the rules and goals of life's "games," while also allowing for agentic "players". The reason games are serious for Ortner, is because "power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high" (1996:12). However, my interpretation of the "work of utopia," integrating Gibson-Graham's diverse economies and Weeks' utopian demands in the context of Mirkwood House is that literal playfulness and pleasure can not only be a part of the process, but crucial to participating and enduring in these serious games.

Through playful experimentation with diverse economies and blurring the lines between work and play, Mirkwood members become subjects that can engage in theory-informed action and their direct actions can inform theory in utopian projects. Utopian projects inherently have some tentative theories about what might be better than the status quo, and thus on-the-ground utopian projects engage in praxis, theory in action. Play is a kind of political praxis for Mirkwood members as they seek to put ideas into action that challenge prevailing capitalist norms, but then must also be reflective enough

to adjust to failure, success, changes, dynamic circumstances, as well as the inter-play of multiple utopian projects within their own community that may come into conflict. In line with Malaby, I assert that a subject with play as a disposition can do the work of improvising, experimenting with forms of living in a contingent world. For Mirkwood members, play is a major part of how the intentional community practices diverse economies, world-building, and self-building, whether fleeting or long-standing and systemic, and despite internal and external conflict.

Conclusion

I will be taking the diverse and community economies approach of Gibson-Graham in order to look at the place of intentional communities and their members as political economic projects and subjects in the here and now. I will explore Mirkwood members' experiences "becoming-with" as a community and their participation in what I argue is appropriately considered as utopian practice using Ernst Bloch's and others' processual and mediated approach to utopia. By using the concept of play seriously, I look at the space where members occupy a complex interweaving experience of multiple community and economic practices shaping social worlds and subjectivities.

The following chapters begin by looking at how Mirkwood members make their house a physical and social space for experimentation and play through the use of fantasy literature. The next chapter looks at members' attitudes toward class and money, their relationships to wage work, and to work at the house. The third chapter explores their playful use of diverse economic practices, particularly that of reusing waste and dumpster diving. In conclusion, I will show how Mirkwood house members engage in concrete practices of making experimental spaces, defining their relationship to money and work, and how their diverse economic practices help them redefine those relationships and their relationships to one another through play. This constitutes a utopian practice of becoming what I am calling seriously playful subjects, building both other worlds and selves.

Chapter 3: Making Experimental Spaces

Started in 1975 as part of a wave of experimental communities, Mirkwood exists to provide people with low incomes with quality housing and is located on prime lakefront property. Because of its physical location, crowded in by the mansions of fraternities and

sororities and newly built condos, developers are eager to capitalize on the property. The city where Mirkwood is located is going through something of a housing boom and construction downtown is expanding, physically limited by the fact that the city is located on an isthmus. Housing construction is further limited by zoning laws, which seek to preserve the Capitol building as the highest building. The boom has been created in part by a multinational company, which recruits young college grads for highly-paid, but arduous work, most leaving after a few years. Housing young people making good money means building nice condos downtown, with ample parking for their cars, since they must commute to the company's massive campus in a town outside the city.

Mirkwood house is a physical and social site of resistance to these forces and the power of its name and the subjects that naming interpellates are part of this resistance. The practice of making the Mirkwood space creates an-other world in which certain kinds of subjects are welcome, attracted, and produced. First, I will discuss literature on space and naming in more depth. Second, I will explore Mirkwood members' overt use of fantasy to not only imagine their space, but to frame their identities in the house. I will then move on to discuss Mirkwood as a space of difference for members and what that means for them and the larger project of building other worlds.

...

Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space is helpful for looking at how space is crucial to the everyday experience of hegemonic power. In particular, though, it is helpful in recognizing the ultimate failure of hegemonic power to completely control space and therefore the possibility in the social production of space for constructions that work *against* hegemonic power, and also *for* something else (Lefebvre 1991). Lefebvre contends that social change cannot happen without an appropriate space, physical, mental, and social, saying that "so long as the only connection between work spaces, leisure spaces, and living spaces is supplied by the agencies of political power... so long must the project of 'changing life' remain no more than a rallying cry to be taken up or abandoned according to the mood of the moment" (1991:59-60). Intentional communities and cooperative houses often explicitly intend to be these spaces and Mirkwood members actively seek to blur lines between work, leisure, and living in their creation of a space of difference within which to experiment with "changing life."

Michel de Certeau speaks of power over space in terms of strategies and tactics. He defines strategies as the work of hegemonic power and tactics as everyday responses to that power, constituting the lived reality of everyday space (Certeau 1984). We could view Mirkwood and intentional communities more broadly as practicing tactics in this way. Yet, this is somewhat limiting, despite Certeau's valorization of the everyday hero, because he rests power still firmly on one side of this equation. Following J.K. Gibson-Graham, we could say the serious structure of strategies is placed in a binary opposition to the event-ness, fleeting and momentary, of diverse economies, thus rendering it less potentially powerful (1996, 2006). In contrast, the larger network of cooperative housing that Mirkwood is a part of actively seeks not just to resist, but to restructure, slowly expanding its legal collective ownership over more properties as well as its support of other forms of cooperative ownership in housing and business, locally and regionally. I would characterize this as being somewhere in between Certeau's strategy and tactics (1984), tactics being used in the service of creating a larger strategic "field of action" (Levebvre).

For Doreen Massey, spaces are processes and she also critiques Certeau, but in rejection of the term trajectory as flat and reductive, which she sees in his binary notion of strategies and tactics (2005:26). Massey uses trajectories in the plural to convey the multiple interrelations of difference in space (2005:10-11). She employs Johannes Fabian's term "coevalness" as "concern[ing] a stance of recognition and respect in situations of mutual implication. It is an imaginative space of engagement...It is a political act" (2005:69-70). Further, Massey argues that conceiving of space as a "sense of place" with memory, stasis and nostalgia [tends to cause] relapse back into the comfort of Being rather than forging ahead with the project of Becoming" (Massey 1994:120). This emphasis on motion and change over time *and* space is important for thinking about Mirkwood and its members in the gerund.

Time in everyday life is also an important part of what Levebvre calls a "construction of situations" in space (Levebvre 1960). The production of space incorporates "its instants as "moments," so as to intensify the vital productivity of everydayness, its capacity for communication, for information, and also and above all for pleasure in natural and social life... The theory of moments, then...would thus tend...to go beyond the old oppositions of lightness and heaviness, of seriousness and the lack of seriousness" (Levebvre 1960). This is crucial to understanding the space-time experience at Mirkwood house as a "field of action" which contests hegemonic

production of space through concrete practices, physical and social, that blur the boundaries between such oppositions as work and play.

This “field of action” includes conflict and contestation within and without the actual Mirkwood site and, I argue, open strategy to produce “proper places,” for empowerment and identity in contrast to Certeau’s binary (Cresswell in Low et al 2003:32). Low et al define contested spaces as “geographic locations where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power” (2003:18). Mirkwood is a place openly produced and reproduced to be a site of power and identity for actors whose social positions are defined by economic and sometimes political marginality in the context of mainstream US/Midwest society. In this particular time, Mirkwood was in contestation with the less hierarchical, but still differential power of the larger cooperative network and the vast differential of access to power between Mirkwood house and the city government.

The production and contestation of space is in part practiced through naming. Most obvious in colonial and post-colonial contexts, naming has not only discursive but material power as well. Paul Ricoeur argues that, “language is a modality of being-in-the-world, such that language not only represents or refers, but ‘discloses’ our being-in-the-world” (Csordas in Low et al 2003:6). This observation is similar to Richardson, but with the mediation of language and experience as together part of being in worlds we are in and create to be in. Critical toponymy scholars Pinchevski and Torgovnik describe place-naming as “a political practice par excellence of power over space” (2002:367). Critical toponymy seeks to treat place names as “‘social facts’ embedded in intricate cultural interrelations and tension-filled conceptions of space” (Berg and Vuolteehano 2009). Light and Young discuss the economic aspects of place naming. In particular, they look at naming as part of a commodifying process, of which evidence abounds in the contemporary names of urban places like sports stadiums but is encroaching on other territories such as street names and transit stops (2015). Mirkwood housing cooperative is a physical and social site of place-making through naming that works against this trend. In particular, Mirkwood uses the fantasy world of author J.R.R. Tolkien to participate in a utopian practice of constructing de-commodified space and particular subjects.

Fantasy and Imagining Space

Single-family homes rarely have their own names. A house may be referred to as “the Smith’s house” as a some-thing privately possessed by named persons. But cooperative houses themselves often have their own names regardless of who lives in them. They in fact can serve to effectively name the people living in them, or having once lived in them. The name “Mirkwood” refers to a place in J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy world, Middle Earth. Mirkwood is the home of the Silvan (forest) Elves in the Middle Earth of the Third Age. They live in the trees and the elves themselves are immortal (they never die of old age but may die by other means). During the War of the Ring these particular wood-elves were the strongest of all the Elven kingdoms and aided in banishing Sauron the Necromancer (Tolkien 2014).

Mirkwood House is not the only co-op house named after a place in Tolkien’s world in the Midwest or in the US at large. One of the independent (not within a network) houses in this area is called Rivendell, another Elven kingdom. All of the co-ops in a network in Bloomington, Indiana are named after places in Lord of the Rings including Middle Earth, Helm’s Deep, Mordor, and Rivendell. There is a Lothlorien House in Berkeley, California and another Rivendell in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In a quick and dirty calculation of web-searchable and listed cooperatives, Tolkien’s world is the most common specific naming reference outside of specific spiritual or nature-related terms. This intentional community naming practice may be prolific because of the high level of detail in Tolkien’s fictional world depicting the unlikely triumph of people with seemingly limited power over an overwhelming and destructive force.

The physical space of Mirkwood is an important expression of fantasy and otherworldliness. Todd describes Mirkwood as “beautiful and magical” and other members refer to the house as “the castle,” which in the architectural context of Middle America references another world entirely. It is nestled in amongst other large multi-unit houses, but stands out in bright yellow with red trimming. A rounded turret-looking structure is the external manifestation of a rust-tiled stairway with iron trimmings going to all five levels of the house, basement to fourth floor. There is not so much a front or back, but dimensions identified by the features of the external space: the main door, the lakeside. The house has had multiple additions over the years as a professor’s home, a women’s boarding house, an army barracks, and ultimately as a co-op.

The name of the house as an elven kingdom interpellates members immediately as “Elves.” This happens through informal conversation, but also formal roles in the

house organization. The first house meeting I attended was held at the local downtown library as house reconstruction was still underway. We met in a brightly lit, lime-green painted room, which didn't make the quite long and intense meeting any more warm and fuzzy, though Fiona's pointy elfish hat gave me some comfort. During that meeting, we elected positions of responsibility in the house. These were designated formally by the use of "Elf" in the position title. For example, Conflict Elf is someone who takes on the task of resolving conflicts as a third-party mediator. Garden Elf organizes the planting and maintaining of the garden. The playful use of naming members as "Elves" served to ease tension a little in the midst of discussion of serious problems, like people not having housing. This was evidenced by way of a general softening of vocal tone right after "Elf" was spoken, and smiles all around. Here, formal positions in the house were titled based on the fantasy world that the house name conjures. The place name created formal titles and "Elf" identities for these house members. It also allowed members to remind themselves that being involved in Mirkwood House is an act of mutual fantasy-play, an act of world-making, fun in the midst of serious, material work and some suffering.

As part of an informal tour after the second house meeting I attended, it became apparent that the space had a vividly imagined past and future. I was seeing the house in a state somewhere in between finished construction and ready to move-in. It felt raw to me in the sense that it was in a kind of indeterminate state. Timothy, who was earlier in a tense argument with another member was smiling broadly and telling me about the terracing that they had before the fire that would be rebuilt for gardening. He showed me the huge rocks they moved last summer for the construction vehicles and would move back this Spring. As we walked inside, I smelled the dust of construction and saw its haze in the air blurring the starkness of the now-sterile white walls. We walked variously on plastic tarp, dusty wood, and cardboard as we went deeper into the bowels of the house, winding downstairs past the industrially-equipped kitchen into a clearly very old, part of the house. Many of the murals and tags on the walls remained from over the years, including a reimagined "Starry Night" mural by one of the many sets of stairs, several anarchy symbols, more forest and tree paintings, and a "we didn't start the fire" tag, which Caleb lamented. As we went, veteran members noted where things used to be, what rooms functioned as the computer lab, the bike shop, the music practice room. This imagery of the past constructed my own image of the space as I walked through and both new and old members began to imagine future plans. Liam and Timothy, who

were intensely arguing before, were now imagining and laughing together about past memories and new plans.

During this tour of the house, conducted amidst the dust of construction and the sterile new white paint, we were shown small rooms that were called “hobbit-holes.” Hobbits are a race of people in Tolkien’s fantasy world, small in stature, who love to eat, grow things, drink ale, and smoke pipeweed (Tolkien 2011). These rooms designated “hobbit holes” were smaller than bedrooms, so not legally rentable. As the informal tour group passed one of these rooms, a prospective member and I talked about what we could do with that space. I mentioned having nice cushions on the floor and he said we should set up a hookah. I then suggested it be a designated “smoke session” room. This mutual imaginary construction came directly after Liam designated that room “another hobbit hole.” The prospective member and I created an image of simple pleasure for that space, befitting a hobbit, making the space in a fantasy that was also something we could make in reality.

One of these hobbit holes was in the past the “crasher room,” meant for travelers and especially band members at the house for shows and parties. This had been a contentious topic at the house meeting just ended and the cause for Liam and Timothy’s brief animosity. Liam was asking to rent that space as an “office” for his bike shop business, which also had a non-profit element, which gets donated food and dumpster dived food, “processes it” and distributes it on bicycles to hungry people in the community. However, it would really be another new member’s bedroom, for much reduced rent, but could be used as a crasher room when that member was away. Liam was asking to use a legal loophole to allow the hobbit hole to be rented as a bedroom for one of his workers. The tenuous legality wasn’t the contentious issue however. The contention was that the space would not be open for crashers most of the time and that was really important to several people. This argument made it apparent that most members are not very concerned with legality, particularly when it concerns their own house, but more concerned about the use of the room as a space open to non-members and that would facilitate concerts and parties by being accommodation for bands. Liam was asking that the room be used for work, play, and private living all at once, when each of those was appropriate/available, thus creating a space that blurred these boundaries in its physical function. Others were okay with some blurring of function but wanted to make sure that the play function of the room would still be available in practice. This represents a struggle for the balance of these several functions in the

space of the house. There was no question that the blurring of these uses was okay and appropriate especially considering the willingness to find legal loopholes. The question was only the balance of work, play, and living.

While down in the kitchen, organizing, Timothy began brainstorming what to do with the niche that didn't house any appliances. He said this was where everyone hung out in the past, gathering around a table while people were cooking and talk. He was thinking about chairs and a table and thinking about where we could get those. I said that when my coop in Indy switched to piano benches for the kitchen table, more people could squeeze in and it was a lot more social. He said, "Yeah, we should have booths. Then, I mentioned, "What about old car seats like at [another co-op]?" He exclaimed and we high-fived and said "Yep, that's what has to happen." We then ran to Caleb and Nala in the next room to tell them and Caleb said, "I like the way you're thinking." Nala, a veteran member, later said she "felt very strongly" about painting the stairwell yellow, as it had been before, but this time adding Elvish symbols with vines and leaves winding down the stairwell and around the top of the room. Another member then suggested someone who knew Elvish (the fictional language created by Tolkien) and could help craft the words. We all drank and listened to music and laughed. This kind of imaginative work bonded new and old members and was playful, involved talk of physically making the space, but also producing a space for creative imagining of the Mirkwood world, past and future.

Mirkwood as a Space of Difference

When it came time to actually move into the house for good (or so we thought at the time) I brought my few belongings into the still quite empty house. One of the first things I noticed was a message written on the mantelpiece mirror in what I know now to be the "Quiet Room." It read in finger-traced dust, "Elf Liberation Front" in big letters. I laughed and smiled to myself as I dragged my bags down the hall. This phrase at once evoked Tolkien's fantasy world and militant social movements. This immediately interpellated members moving in as subjects of another world, as "Elves," and part of a movement for justice in this world.

The fireplace in the "Great Room" is the center of activity and sociality at Mirkwood. Necessarily at first, because the heat had not yet been cut on by the city and many of us had already moved in. But it continued to be the place where everyone gathered, fire or no fire, heat or no heat, legal occupancy or no, throughout my time

there. The first night I moved in, after throwing my bags in my very bare, sterile room, I tentatively approached the Great Room, where people were sitting around the fire, playing the half-uncovered piano (one of the two), or standing around with drinks in hand talking. After getting the lowdown from Ashley about how to use the stove without causing another fire and that there was indeed food already brought in from dumpster diving, I found a seat on one of the couches posted in front of the fire. The space was already lively regardless of the sterile white walls and the unfinished, mid-construction, dusty environment. People were laughing and talking, some in clothes, some in pajamas and it already felt homey. Lena asked me where my room was and then exclaimed, “we’re neighbors!” This made me feel part of the house and also gave me a sense of the space as constituting its own neighborhood, separate from the “real” one outside in the midst of frats and sororities, and other co-op houses, all near the main street and university campus.

Several members of Mirkwood house identify themselves as outsiders, part of other worlds within a “normal” world. Many described themselves as “outsiders” in some way at a key point in their lives, being a loner in high school, or “hanging out with the weird kids,” like Fiona. One night, out at The Crypt a member-operated music venue, Caleb mentioned overhearing someone describe the venue as a place where kids could go and stay relatively out of trouble. This prompted Waylon and Caleb to discuss their experiences of being younger. Waylon says, “I was the fat kid with the lisp.” Caleb laughs, “Me too.” They shake hands and Caleb says, “Be the change. That’s what Mirkwood is there for! Viva Mirkwood!” and we all laugh. Here, Mirkwood is a place for people who have felt outcast in one way or another to have a space where they can finally belong. The invocation of “be the change” and “Viva!” again references social movements, indicating the intimacy between the production of spaces, subjectivity, and notions of changing society itself, that these everyday practices of making and inhabiting spaces construct different worlds and subjects that belong in those worlds.

When Todd is asked by other people where he lives and what Mirkwood is like he describes it as a “Hippie frat, if you wanna be concise about it (laughing).” It is interesting here that Todd uses the combination of more well-known social concepts to succinctly describe the cooperative, including the invocation of a specifically male institution. Nevertheless, Mirkwood members view their house as outside of the “mainstream,” and also as outside the norm within their own organization. All of the members I interviewed described Mirkwood as the house that was somewhat outcast,

despite it being the largest one. Multiple members say they ended up at Mirkwood because they couldn't get into any other cooperative house. Yet, despite the last choice nature of some members' entry into the Mirkwood world, these members were some of the fiercest defenders of the house and the need for its continued existence in the community.

Todd says, "It has more of an anarchist bent to it. It's definitely a lot more open as far as being accepting of very weird people. There's a lot of people that get rejected at other houses, but they tell them to [apply for] membership at Mirkwood. It's like, (laughs) how do I say this without sounding awful? Well, there are some co-ops you go to and everyone at the house is fucking gorgeous. Skinny, thin, attractive people. And Mirkwood doesn't seem to have that kind of emphasis on physical appearance. There's people of all beauty types." Todd sees Mirkwood as a place of acceptance for those with politically marginal views, so-called weirdos, and emphasizes interestingly, those who might not be considered conventionally attractive. Yet, his various categories of outsider status do not speak to the inclusion or exclusion of particular class or racial groups.

My own experience of Mirkwood's environment differed from where I stayed while awaiting legal occupancy, Artemis house. The difference between Mirkwood and Artemis was that their house was "together" officially, as in they were all living, eating together regularly, but at Mirkwood people would just spontaneously show up, work or no work, to hang out in the great room and you knew it was somewhere you could go to be around people and have fun or work or both. In contrast, the living room of Artemis was barely used, only for house meetings and projector showings. People generally stayed in their rooms unless there was an organized event or community meal. Mirkwood was as Todd says, "the fun, dirty little party house" where people were just drawn to be in a "non-judgmental space, where they could be a weirdo." Mel, who identifies as indigenous, even describes it as "an escape from the rest of the community."

The concept of Mirkwood as separate from other social spaces is even more firmly invoked through linking it with the concept of a sovereign state. After finding out that we will have to move back out of the house, several of us were sitting around the big fireplace after an emergency informal meeting in the aftermath of this decision by the city. At some point, there is brief talk of Disney movies and Caleb says loudly and proudly, "I have never seen an animated Disney film." I'm skeptical and say, "No way. I don't believe you." Gary says jokingly, "If you don't like this country, Caleb, you can

leave it.” Caleb responds, “I did. I live in the People’s Republic of Mirkwood.” This is a striking phrase to use, evoking national identity, citizenship, and revolutionary political movements. It comes in response to a company that for many is a symbol of American cultural dominance and massive multinational capital. Invoking Mirkwood as a separate political entity from the US as well as disdaining the capitalist media is telling. The fact that Disney is also a purveyor of fantasy, means that it could be viewed in direct competition with Tolkien’s world of fantasy, which is asserted by members as a much better world. Implicitly, members of Mirkwood house are then also Andersonian citizens of this imagined, but material community (Anderson 1983). This idea of sovereignty, citizenship, and belonging runs in direct contrast to the imposed exile we were then facing as a result of the actual government’s recent decision.

Conclusion

Mirkwood as an experimental space was threatened by the city and those in the larger organization and so Mirkwood house is a contested space in at least two overlapping realms. The threat of surveillance from both prevented occupation at first, but then was ignored as people got fed up and just simply needed a roof over their heads. Every time we heard the doorbell (meaning someone without a key was there) we would all look at one another and someone would get up to peer through the window to see if it was an inspector. Members would take these risks as they had to for the past 2 years in the “fight to save the house.” During the 2-year struggle, those on the staff and some other coop houses refused to use the name of the house, Mirkwood, and instead referred to Mirkwood by its postal address, stripping it of its liveliness, its humanizing and creative identity (Low et al 2003:24), and thus stripping the members of their interpellated elven identity. But Mirkwood was always continuous even though their house wasn’t livable because they maintained that identity regardless of occupancy, even using the term “Mirkwood Diaspora” to concisely introduce themselves to members of other co-ops. “*The People’s Republic of Mirkwood*,” is distinguished by its epic imaginative identity using the world of J.R.R. Tolkien and its assertion of a separate collective identity, embodied in the physical space of the house.

For members, Mirkwood is a space for subjects who don’t “fit in” in some way. Yet, the outsider-ness that is accepted and spoken of by Caleb, Waylon, Todd, and Mel seems to focus on being either politically, physically, or subculturally different (e.g. as nerds or weirdos) rather than being explicitly inclusive of say, queer folks, or people of

color. Identifying as loners and “weirdos” or not conventional in some other way, they find themselves together in a big mansion on a lake proudly proclaiming their weird and making it a formidable force in the community. Weirdos, anarchists, hippies, whatever they variously call themselves to describe their subject position, they are all Elves of Mirkwood.

Mirkwood has been a place of acceptance and “given people a lot of dignity” as Caleb says. The naming of the house and the subjects it calls into being are not lost ones, or rejects. They are the Elves of Mirkwood, a wise and noble race. Just as the Elves fight in alliance with others to defeat Sauron the Necromancer in Tolkien’s fantasy world, Mirkwood House Elves are part of a movement to prevent an ever-rising cost of living in their city, in the real world. The naming practice referencing a detailed fantasy world is a distinct expression of “power over space” as Pinchevski and Torgovnik (2002) describe and represents a “social fact” (Berg and Vuolteehano 2009) allowing us to see how creative appropriations of fantasy construct material and social realities.

Mirkwood is made through this creative appropriation into an experimental space for world-making *and* self-making. The space interpellates member subjectivity, but members also participate in filling in what that interpellation means through everyday practices through what Richardson calls, “being there,” following Heidegger’s being-in-the world (Richardson 1984). Richardson says, “being-in-the-world” means that for us to be we must have a world to be in. We cannot otherwise exist. Yet “world” is not an external thing, existing apart from our actions and awaiting our entrance; but it is dependent upon our being in. Through our actions, or interactions, we bring about the world in which we then are; we create so that we may be, in our creations” (Richardson in Low et al 2003:74). Mirkwood members are at once being shaped by the already existing imaginary and material world of Mirkwood, but also actively engage in the recreation and alter-creation of it in an ongoing sociospatial practice. In turn, these practices make them into subjects that belong in that space. This becoming is not only or even primarily a conscious, serious undertaking. It is necessarily and importantly playful.

Mirkwood creates the kind of sociospatial infrastructure that Levebvre sees as necessary for “changing life,” a space that the blurs the lines between work, play, and living. While I was at Mirkwood, members literally practice making the space by physically constructing and reconstructing walls, appliances, lighting, etc through multiple forms of voluntary, paid semi-skilled, and professional work. This physical work grounded members’ identity with the space. Further, the collective imaginative work

done with each other inside the space demonstrates a practice of playful fantasy that becomes material in the physical work of recreating the house. This is inspired by the naming practice using Tolkien's fantasy-world in a way that, though set in an urban environment, constitutes Sargisson's notion of estrangement that creates important critical distance for "experiments with the self" (207:397). The particular practice of naming employed is imaginative work that balances obviously and explicitly imaginary ideals and the real ideals of cooperation and decommodification that members work toward within constraint placed by the larger socioeconomic system in which they hold marginal positions. Mirkwood house itself is part of the "raw material" of constructing a realistic Utopian image and allows them to become certain subjects, creating the outlines of the game so they can play it (Bloch 1986; Ortner 2006).

Mirkwood is a constant process, in terms of Massey's emphasis on relation and motion, rather than embodying a static "sense of place." Not only because it is actually in an overt process of building and negotiation, but because Mirkwood as a social space is an ongoing process, without a particular prescribed "end" in sight, a particular utopian image is not settled on or looked toward. Going from social space to social being of subjects, Massey makes a distinction between the static of "being" and the "project of becoming" (Massey 1994). Mirkwood members' mostly functional fluidity in the space of the house during my fieldwork urges a becoming of subjects that can belong in such a fluid and processual space. The fact that so many people did not in fact drop out and literally move on during the contestation with the larger co-op organization and struggles with the city is a testament to this. This process of contestation made some even more intent on "saving the house" and ultimately "being there" in all senses of the phrase.

Returning to Levebvre, this process is comprised of "moments" of "vital productivity" in everyday practice such as imagining a new hobbit hole, or writing "Elf Liberation Front" on the mirror. But this productivity doesn't result in a static product for consumption, but an always gerund "communication, information, and *above all* pleasure in natural and social life" (Levebvre 1960). This pleasure comes from the blurring of work and play that members engage in in the imaginative space of Mirkwood, patching drywall and dancing in the kitchen.

By using the fantasy world of J.R.R. Tolkien, Mirkwood house is constructed as a space of imaginative play with other worlds. This identification with fantasy place creates what Sargisson describes as "conceptual distance" while otherwise being enmeshed and engaged with a contemporary capitalist environment (2007, 396). Mirkwood house as a

place operates in a kind of liminal conceptual space, certainly embedded in contemporary capitalist property relations, but also functioning as an intentional place, both figurative and physical, to cultivate community feeling through collective place-making, more egalitarian decision-making processes, and a shared sense of experimentation with alternatives. Mirkwood's fantasy-inspired space is an infrastructure that serves to place practices as not only *against* something (capitalism, oppression) but as *for* something "now, here" (Gibson-Graham 2006). This constitutes a "utopian demand" (Weeks 2011), one that actively mediates between the constraints of the systems that surround and permeate Mirkwood house/its residents' lives and the possibilities for subversion and change that are enabled through intentional community practices. This organized collective power in community sees realistic potential in engaging in a "work of utopia" (Kosnoski 2011) through imaginative, playful practices "building into the blue" (Bloch 2000) as a physical space for living well in a real community and as an experimental space for enacting new worlds and selves.

Chapter 4: Relating to Class, Money, and Work

Outside of their fantasy and community identity as Elves, Mirkwood members do of course live within contemporary society and by necessity must participate in its systems, including those of monetary exchange and wage labor. This means they are also entangled in notions of class belonging. However, as part the experimental space that is Mirkwood and the larger cooperative network, they are able to play with their participation in these modes by being part of an intentional community. Because part of the selection of members includes a loose requirement that the member must have a low income, class belonging and assumptions are woven into membership itself. However, because 1) the requirement is not externally validated and 2) does not include assets or other forms of wealth that impact a person's access to resources, this requirement doesn't preclude a diversity of class identifications or experiences. What it does is create an environment that assumes, and asserts as norms, certain class-related values, such as resourcefulness, sharing so that others have enough, and an expressed disdain for wealth inequality.

Beyond class identification, many members choose to work less for direct wages, and spend more of their labor time on Mirkwood house, finding ways to make the community more self-sustaining, viewing this as valuable because it

maintains/strengthens the community's ability to share collective benefits. Thus, many members view wage work as a way to "get by" and money as a "necessary evil" as opposed to more meaningful non-wage work they associate with Mirkwood house activities. Within the context of the experimental space of Mirkwood, members are able to collectively practice and play with different modes of pursuing what they need and want to live a good life than those of mainstream capitalist goals of upward class mobility, accumulation of money, and identity as productive members of the workforce.

First, I will discuss how I will be using class and helpful literature on money and work. Second, I will explore members' awareness of their class positions and how they articulate and respond to that position with each other. Third, I will discuss members' views on and expressed relationship to money in their lives. Finally, I will look at how members talk about their individual work and how they talk about work at Mirkwood house. The above will demonstrate how Mirkwood members occupy a space of tension and play between embeddedness in capitalist society and building alternative worlds.

...

I will be using class in the combined sense of both a Marxian definition of a material place in the structure of capitalist production and class as a cultural identification. The latter is informed by Bourdieu's use of class as not only material relations, but also symbolic and Weber's approach to the emergence of the work ethic helps to frame how class members come to identify with their positions in a larger material *and* cultural system (Bourdieu 1984; Weber 2002). This allows me to account for Mirkwood members' awareness of their status via their income, resources, and wage jobs, and a less defined sense of class affinity generated through the social interactions of Mirkwood and the larger cooperative network.

In David Graeber's "Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value," Graeber's main project is to come up with a notion of value that takes into account meaning-making as well as both agency and constraint on human action. Graeber does this in part by placing Marx and Mauss in conversation and presenting their views on exchange, value, and economy as complementary, as both ultimately asserting the importance of desire and pleasurable experience as the potential in human productivity and exchange (2001:260). With regards to money in particular, Graeber notes, "money is quite often identified with its owner's person, if in a somewhat different sense [than gifts a la Mauss]. Rather than serving as mark of distinctiveness, it tends to be identified with the holder's generic, hidden capacities for action" (2001:94). He employs Marx's distinction

between money and coin, with coin being the physical object offered in exchange, while money constitutes a “universal potential for action” when withdrawn from immediate circulation. Further, Graeber connects capacities for action and “congealed action” as Being. Thus, he asserts that patterns of actions, including that of accumulating money, brings into being certain subjects. Graeber describes Marx’s assertions about how money relates to worker subjectivity, as the “meaning and importance of their own creative energies, their own capacity to act. Money represents the ultimate significance of their actions” (2001:67). Graeber describes Mauss’ “total prestations” in contrast to monetary exchange as well as competitive gift exchange as “creating permanent relationships between individuals and groups, relations that were permanent precisely because they could not be canceled out by repayment.” He asserts this is how we treat our friends (or how most people treat their friends) and intentional communities are perhaps somewhere in between these common friendship relationships of “total prestation” and Mauss’s eventually abstracted large-scale communism (2001:218- 219). Mirkwood members express how they eschew money for accumulating or saving in contrast to this kind of generic being. They assert other practices including various forms of gift-exchange that empower them to provide for themselves and others through different uses of money and different determinations of what counts as valuable.

In Kathleen Millar’s *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio’s Garbage Dump*, the author explores how the work of catadores, or garbage pickers, generate social meaning from their work on the dump and questions the dichotomy of informal/formal economy as a way to frame their experiences. When discussing catadores’ conceptions of money, Millar notes how accumulation of money and resources does not necessarily translate into a “good life” in her interlocutors’ stories of one particular catador (117-118). Furthermore, as Millar grapples with catadores’ “vanishing” money, Millar lands on the notion that “spending became a form of relationality—a way of working out how to be kin, friend, or neighbor to others in conditions of radical uncertainty.” Similarly, Mirkwood members often use spending money as a way to reciprocate and contribute to relationships, a show of mutual respect or gratitude, mainly through enjoyment and pleasure. Millar employs the framework of “forms of living” to conceptualize work, leaving room for multiple conceptions of work and the idea that work itself cannot be separated from the idea of a good (or bad) life. Further, she contends that the category of work functions as a technique of governance by the capitalist state to discipline subjects into manageable “worker” identities. The

concept of “forms of living”, “aims to break open this reduction, allowing for a diversity of productive actions that do not fit easily into capitalist categories of labor and notions of work” (2018:8-11).

As discussed earlier, Kathi Weeks challenges the concept and value of work, wage or salary labor, in political theory and political activism in *The Problem with Work* (2011). She contends that work has such power over our lives because it is one of the main avenues of sociality for our necessarily social species. Thus, its importance in determining “who we are,” including our value, and our arguably docile subjectivity in relation to work limits more radical demands for other worlds (Weeks 2011:76-77). Weeks uses the contrast between Marx and Weber to set up her analysis of the moral underpinnings of work, the work ethic. She notes that while Marx focuses on structural relations of exploitation between property owners and those without property, Weber focuses on peoples’ awareness of themselves as differentially positioned workers and their identification with work. This results in the development of certain kinds of subjects, through a particular history of meaning-making, namely the Protestant Reformation (Weeks 2011:39). Weeks describes Weber’s account of the Protestant work ethic, as “a highly paradoxical phenomenon, at once powerfully effective and spectacularly self-destructive” (2011:41). It is on this paradox that she bases her ultimate assertion of the need and possibility for success in the utopian demand for post-work imaginaries, which importantly includes seeing people as “selves to invent,” in order to create and be in other worlds (Weeks 2011:90). Mirkwood members’ overt use of fantasy to play at new selves sets the stage for alterations beyond that and their operation in between norms of contemporary capitalist work culture experiments with how to be in community and how that re-forms productive identity.

Class (Un)Consciousness

Mirkwood members and others in the co-op network have a keen sense of some larger economic realities they are living in and working to alter, or at least mitigate, in their own and others’ lives. This awareness is apparent as members bring up direct issues of class, money, and work in everyday conversation. Over one evening’s communal dinner with a mixture of Mirkwood and another house’s members, we are discussing the presidential election, monetary support of campaigns, and economic policy in general. One co-op member mentions, “imperial studies, or as others call it, economics.” All around the table laugh, nodding or clapping in agreement, enjoying this

incisive quip. This overt indictment of the field of economics as “imperial studies” shows how members are distinctly aware and critical of the dominance of economics by neoliberal ideology, its preeminence as the ideological force behind public policy, and its role in worldwide colonial and neocolonial conquests. This vocal and direct indictment of an entire academic field implies disdain for privileged academic class members and those in even “higher” classes that have benefited from its deployment. However, several of those around the table are in fact of an academic and/or privileged class, including myself, and there is not an overt recognition or further discussion of how their/our fields may have contributed to similar global projects, nor how they have themselves perhaps benefited from those global projects. Thus, this interaction seems to serve to assert solidarity with the majority of Mirkwood and the larger cooperative network’s membership as belonging at least “in spirit” with each other as in the same though nebulous class, de-emphasizing internal differences, while emphasizing collective differences from class “others.” This solidarity is affectively buttressed by the agreeing laughter accompanying this discussion.

However, Mirkwood members’ class others are not only those “above” them, but also positioned “below” them, and this is sometimes even reflected in the way members distinguish between themselves. Around the fire one night, Ashley discusses the disappointment that the house won’t be ready to host “road kids”, but in the same conversation mentions that “transients” had been using the firepit and backyard and she wanted to make sure they left. Here, Ashley asserts a clear difference between what kind of nomadism is legitimate or desirable to have in Mirkwood spaces. While “road kids” are allowed, “transients” are not. She defines road kids as young people travelling, presumably by choice, and transients indicate the houseless population of the city, mostly older, actually closer to her age. This difference highlights that intentional communities, no matter how theoretically inclusive, are inherently exclusive. While Mirkwood operates overtly as housing for low-income individuals and families, there is a selection process and house approval of who can be in the space to maintain safety and comfort for members. This underscores the way in which affinity and community belonging is constantly defined and redefined.

After the disappointing and disruptive announcement that we could not legally occupy the house after all, there was a scramble to respond. I went with Caleb to meet with both Mirkwood and other house members to strategize. After a brief call with Liam, who was the Membership Coordinator, Caleb says, “I think he’s of the mind that we need

to separate the wheat from the chaff, but I think it will backfire, because the people that have options and aren't just desperate are the ones who are gonna leave." He mentions Liam's "elitist attitude" and says, "people like Lena will squat, they don't care, they don't have anywhere to go. We have to address these immediate needs." According to Caleb, Liam has just expressed using this crisis, disturbingly, to "naturally" exclude people, though I'm not aware who exactly constitutes the wheat or the chaff. Caleb notes Liam's elitist attitude, but responds mostly with a different, but still decidedly pragmatic conclusion. Those less-resourced members will be the exact ones that won't be able to find other accommodations and will have nothing left to lose in a non-legal occupancy battle, thus the need to provide for them from the cooperative network's funds so membership doesn't collapse. Within Mirkwood, there are clearly differing ideas about just who is most valuable and how they are valuable. Just as they themselves might be considered to be less-valuable members of mainstream society, so they too at times label their own community members in an informal hierarchy. When the intentional community is stressed, affinity may be harder to assert or maintain, play or no play.

In addition, as members' assert affinity with one another and variously define class "others", the perception of those outside the community may be more ambivalent. This is exemplified by an interaction between a few members' and a cab driver as they head out for the night. After waiting a few minutes outside, we get in a cab and the driver says, "You guys are really slumming it here," sarcastically referring to the fact that this neighborhood has huge houses with lakeside views. Caleb responds, "But we pay half the rent. That's the point," smiling and looking at the cab driver. The cab driver smiles back and laughs. Here, a working-class cab driver jokes about Mirkwood members' ability to live in this normally wealth-related location. As a cab driver, he knows the town and knows this is Mirkwood co-op. It is unclear whether this exchange is the cab driver's assertion of class difference between himself and his riders or if this is a mutual recognition of and delight in the way that cooperative members can disrupt normal forms of geographic class segregation through collective ownership.

Another day as Mirkwood Elves filter in after work or school or parenting duties, several gather in a circle on curb-found chairs, passing around a shared pool of six-packs. We decide to play Cards Against Humanity, an irreverent game where players fill in the blanks of provocative sentences with a choice from their hand and the turn-taker picks their favorite. Because of the nature of the content of the game, a member brings up an art installation they read about in which a machine spits out pennies at the rate of

minimum wage by pulling a lever. Someone did it for two hours, making a profound point about the state of wages in the US. Members around the circle laugh rather than begin a serious discussion of this issue, especially interesting because several do make minimum wage or just above. All playing the game get excited about this and begin thinking about other installations that would demonstrate similar points, each of which produces another bout of laughter. Noah, who is a member of color, says, "How about just a pile of cash that only white people can touch?" More laughter and clapping. Mirkwood members repeatedly laugh at the absurdity of the low minimum wage and then proceed to generate more ideas that make similar points, in this case, about structural racism. This laughter and playing with creative ideas to illustrate class, race, and other inequalities serves to bring together those who may by way of material resources be differently positioned in terms of class (and definitely race) as "on the same page/side," as effectively (and affectively) in solidarity with particular recognition of classism and racism. What isn't acknowledged in this playful back and forth, however, is the everyday impact of the class or race differences among members themselves that affect each others' lives, and thus must affect their life as a community.

Mirkwood as a (mostly) functional intentional community, does directly serve to subvert some assumptions about class and what those with low incomes can have or be. Just by being able to live in Mirkwood house, with its beautiful historic structural details and physical location directly on the waterfront, resists the idea that low rent has to mean low quality of housing far from resources. The cooperative network further confounds class roles through the formal structures and responsibilities of property ownership and democratic deliberation. Caleb says, "The co-presidents handle about \$4-8 million in real estate, depending on who you ask, and one cleans houses for a living and the other is a school bus driver. (He laughs and I laugh in response). I mean he lives in one room with his partner... so, no matter how much, yes the system is oppressive, but people do make it work." Here, in their own cooperative housing world, those wielding power over large sums of capital in the form of real estate are working-class, and all cooperative members representing various class affiliations throughout the network participate in governance.

This is a contrast to the notion that someone who cleans houses or drives a bus for a living would not be qualified in the mainstream workforce for such a position, but in the collectively created world of Mirkwood and the larger co-op network, those who would not otherwise have the opportunity to play more white-collar roles are able to

make high-level decisions and are elected by their peers to positions of responsibility. It is interesting that Caleb uses this fact to assert that “people do make [the system] work.” But how do they make it work? In the larger cooperative network’s case, by creating their own social worlds that experiment with community economies and ways of organizing within, but different from, that of mainstream capitalist modes of living and working.

A particularly playful jab at wealth inequality and classism came as recently returned member Bonnie described her train-ride back to town to a group of us hanging out at the house to welcome her. She talked about her and her partner’s experience being in Economy seats for the 40-hour trip saying:

“You can’t lean back all the way, so you’re just curled up in the seat like this [she gets herself into a kind of fetal position].” Noah says, “Yeah, they want you to always remember your class status. We could make this go all the way back, but then you wouldn’t feel your inferiority.” People laugh in agreement. Bonnie says, “The first-class cars have a bed and their own toilet right next to it so they can shit with convenience.” I say in an ad voice, “You don’t even have to get out of bed to go, just reposition, aim.” Caleb adds in some kind of British-like accent, “Pivot, shall we say.” More laughter. Someone then says, “Then the maintenance people have to clean it up.” Another, “You’re a job creator!” Much more laughter.

Here, multiple members join in upping the humorous class critique based on different amenities in the higher priced train cars. Noah jokingly asserts that the pain of sleeping ill-aligned is meant to make you know your place in the larger economic system. Bonnie highlights the juxtaposition of the higher priced car riders and their own shit. I connect their consumption of the higher-priced amenities and marketing discourse. Caleb then adds a more eloquent word, with a British-type accent to emphasize the first-class riders’ upper class-ness in comparison to Bonnie’s and by extension the group as a whole. The final joke uses neoliberalism’s own phraseology, painting the picture that elite shit creates jobs, so how great their literally shitty contribution is that someone gets to have a job cleaning up their shit. This all happens in seconds, among constant laughter, with commentators speaking over it to add their specific contribution. This direct experience of class difference on the train, provides a way for those who already know Bonnie to reaffirm their affinity and those who don’t to assert that solidarity through humor and laughter and making fun of class “others.” Sarcastically employing particularly euphemistic capitalist discourses of marketing and job creation emphasizes the jokers’ alignment with their supposed class affines.

For Mirkwood members, overt discussions of class in a humorous way serves to bond them together, whether they would actually be deemed in the same class by a

more stringent economic definition of class in solidarity/affinity. This is playing with rigid notions of class, while also using play to create community, though this play at times masks unacknowledged positionality and discrimination by members themselves. They grapple with class differences in an abstract structural sense, while also asserting and emphasizing their own class cultural affinity with one another over differences through humor, laughter, play.

Money and Consumption

As part of the semi-structured interviews I conducted, I asked members, “What is your relationship to money? How would you define money or what money means in your life?” Mirkwood members’ responses largely reflected a concept of money as a “necessary evil,” something that they have to have, but that is not a goal of accumulation in and of itself. A few described themselves as “bad with money” because they spend it to the limit. Todd qualifies this by saying, “I don’t buy stuff, things, though. I buy food, movie tickets, booze, things you consume. It’s rent and it’s food. Things you need to survive.” For Todd, the fact that he doesn’t buy “stuff” and uses his money for a kind of consumption that is immediate, rather than consumption based on accumulating things, implies that this kind of consumption is more legitimate. He is using his money and spending money for direct needs as well as, importantly, enjoyment in fleeting experiences. He doesn’t separate out food that he enjoys, seeing movies, and drinking from part of necessities in his life. This signals that enjoyment itself is a necessity and that money is a means to obtain some kinds of enjoyment, those that Todd values. Yet, he still describes himself as “bad with money.” Todd thus seems to have a somewhat contradictory sense of his relationship to money. The push and pull of capitalist values are themselves contradictory: saving as laudable and ironically prescribed as a means to move out of poverty, buying things that are “investments” and things that are immediately disposable or depreciating, spending as necessary to patriotically support “the economy.” Todd recognizes that he is “bad with money” in terms of some of these values, but focuses on survival *and* enjoyment as opposed to prudence, long-term planning for accumulation, or buying material things as justifying explanation for his “bad-ness.”

Mel also describes herself as being “terrible with money,” but also indicts the system of money itself. “It’s a joke, I don’t even know how to deal with it. Once I’m out of [money] it becomes apparent what I needed it for. (Laughter). It’s a little bit silly. I feel

like the whole system is so ridiculous that I don't even know how to begin to take it seriously. I struggle with that. To me the goal is to grow your own food and make a self-sustaining home so you don't have to deal with that bullshit." She doesn't really consider being "terrible with money" as necessarily that bad. It is personally bad for her when she is out of it and needs something, but she places most of her emphasis on the larger concept and system of money itself as "ridiculous." She finds it so ridiculous that she doesn't associate money with something serious, only in the way that she needs it for certain things. Further, she points to what she deems the eventual elimination of the need for money via collective self-sustaining ways of living as the ultimate goal.

Fiona starts her answer to my question about money with a joking, "I pet it lovingly (laughter)," but then goes on to say "I use money to pay bills...my goal is not to accumulate. I use money to get by. I need some. Not a lot." Here, Fiona jokes about an affectionate relationship with money and contrasts that with her pragmatic use of money as a way to "get by." She needs enough for that and not really much more. Fiona's use of joking here suggests that her pragmatic approach is a more matter-of-fact relationship to money and perhaps others, though they may not literally "pet it lovingly," have a more directly reverent view of money itself, which is laughable.

Caleb and Flynn describe themselves as pretty responsible with money, but also link it to how they spend it rather than how they might accumulate it. Flynn unabashedly, though in his gentle way, asserts that his spending on what some may seem non-necessary items are necessary for him. He describes money as a "means to an end" and particularly important for him is music as that end. "I don't actually consider music stuff luxury. I'm a drummer. I end up spending regular expenses on drum related things. It's part of who I am and a necessity." Flynn importantly links his spending to his identity. This is also certainly a capitalist value, "be who you really are/can be by buying." But Flynn is asserting something different. He is asserting that though he is low-income, musical instruments are not extra for him. They are necessities, not only additions to his identity, or making his identity in his consumption of them as capitalist marketing asserts. He is a musician and so spends money for that part of himself over other kinds of consumption.

Caleb says, "I don't tend to save money as money. I tend to immediately push it into something of value like tools. Also, not saving money and working less allows me to have more time to socialize, politic with people in this situation with Mirk. I'm not trying to build a business. For me, it's most efficient for my own interests of living in the house

and community to help Mirk.” Caleb makes a clear distinction between things like tools as valuable rather than money itself. Further, he sees trying to improve in his repairing and online selling business in order to accumulate money as an impediment to what he wants to spend his time doing: maintaining and developing relationships, supporting the Mirkwood community in its ongoing struggles. He invokes the capitalist value of efficiency in an unconventional way, applying it to being what could be considered conventionally as unproductive. Yet, he still uses efficiency and self-interest as values in themselves. What is “efficient” for him is building relationships and Mirkwood house as a social space.

Michael describes his relationship to money by saying:

I tend to be conservative with it, besides my various vices. Everyone has their vices: drinking, concerts. I could get a nice apartment on my own, but I would be exhausted with how much I would need to work for that. Whereas with Mirk, I can work less and live in this cool space. And I try to not overburden myself with work because, living in a place like this, you’re going to end up paying cost in terms of the time you’re going to spend working at the house. So, I view money as important, but also view that as a counterbalance to time. Money is a universal tool in which we agree to have something to exchange. Most people don’t realize it’s a tool.

Here, Michael is also asserting that he is fairly responsible with money, with some exceptions for indulging in what he terms “vices,” but what might also be considered enjoyment and release as the others have noted. He then goes on to make a clear outline of his decision-making in relation to wage work and earning money. He has purposely chosen to live in a co-op because it means he doesn’t have to work to exhaustion to pay for an apartment by himself. However, he notes that living in a co-op doesn’t necessarily mean you are working less, just not work for direct wages, but the other benefits accrued as part of a co-op (such as when others work at cleaning the house or cook communal meals). Importantly, Michael sets up the relationship between money and time. He works less for money, which means he has more time to spend engaging as a member of Mirkwood. He further describes money as a tool, which implies that if he doesn’t need money to be the tool that gets him what he needs or wants, but rather works directly for those benefits, then he prefers that rather than spending more time in the labor market.

As will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, dumpster diving is a key diverse economic practice conducted by Mirkwood members which takes them out of a direct monetary exchange relationship for some needs and wants. After one dumpster

diving stop, made in the lead-up to Thanksgiving dinner, the conversation turns to exactly what the consumption strategy is for the meal – that is, whether to only dumpster dive or to purchase a few things as well. We are trying to figure out what all we can make with what we've scored during our dive. Caleb reminds us, "We can buy things actually too and get paid back from house money." Todd says, "Yes, I will buy things." (laughter). Caleb mentions, "We don't need to be like people who only dumpster dive." He continues, "I used to live with young anarchist purists, obviously 18/19, that would give Fiona and Jacob shit for like, going to a restaurant or going to the movies every once in a while and being like, they aren't real anarchists because they do that, and I'm like, they live a way more low-to-the-ground sustainable lifestyle and they'll be here for years, and you'll be gone." Todd says "Yeah, you can't live in a fantasy world where capitalism doesn't exist." Caleb says, "I know a bunch of people who take that shit really seriously and go to live in the wilderness, but that's the wilderness, not the middle of this town in a co-op trying to tell everyone else that they're impure."

Here, Caleb and Todd quickly distinguish themselves from those they deem absolutists about not purchasing food. They will buy things and be reimbursed from house money. Caleb goes on to describe former anarchist members of Mirkwood who would castigate other anarchist members for consuming certain goods and services, defending those other members as having proven much more reliably anti-capitalist/oppressive by their actions and also their continued commitment to Mirkwood in particular. Todd asserts that it is unrealistic to presume you can un-embed yourself from capitalist society and Caleb agrees, noting that living in an urban center, you can't possibly get out of "the system," while those who go to the wilderness are much closer to that ideal.

The overall sense here is that these Mirkwood members play with and sometimes flip notions of capitalist values in a way that complicates the idea of those values' merit. Most members do not focus on saving money to accumulate for some undetermined future use (many would not be able to save much at any time). Instead, they tend to prioritize pleasure, either personal or social, similar to the catadores in Millar's study. Yet some still label themselves as "bad" with money and others use terms such as efficiency to assert the value of their practices, referencing capitalist norms in their description of themselves. Thus, while asserting the importance and legitimacy of spending money on pleasure or sociality, there is still an internalized judgement expressed. Their sometimes-contradictory positions demonstrate the complex reality of

negotiating embeddedness in existing capitalist systems and intentionally making more space in their own lives for community economic practices.

Working as an Individual

Mirkwood members' views and experiences of wage work are tied to their views of money, and wage work is sometimes chosen for less interaction with a hierarchy, with more value placed on working at and for Mirkwood, though some have jobs they feel are meaningful.

When asked about his work, Caleb describes his occupation as selling electronic equipment, mainly music gear online, in partnership with another person who mainly does paperwork and online selling, while Caleb finds, assesses, and fixes up materials for sale. He also employs various people temporarily for bigger projects or when he is overloaded. He says he doesn't really consider something work "unless it's pointless, or for someone else," and proudly states that the only time he has not been self-employed has been 6 months, those months spent working at Liam's bike shop. Caleb clearly values not having a boss, even if it is a friend. However, he is an employer to others, mainly his friends, who help him with his own work at times. He defines the term "work" selectively, but mostly in theory, separating what he does with what more conventional wage work entails. Caleb is in the business of making use of commodities in the second-hand market to make his living, a living which requires less money than if he did not live in a co-op. This work is self-directed and that is something Caleb highly values.

I learn more about Liam's bike shop as part of a run for a free couch (my bed for the duration) and other furniture for the house found by searching the Free section of Craigslist. Caleb and I stop at Liam's bike shop to borrow his van for transporting our free finds and Liam proudly exhibits the showroom and workroom. Liam's occupation is running the bike shop, making money through selling finished bikes and charging for repair and maintenance, while also offering space for others to maintain their own bikes with access to free parts. One element of the bike shop operates as a sort of "Meals on Wheels" program using bikes to deliver donated food to those in need in the area. Some of this food is dumpster-dived, but that is not legally allowed, so that is on the "down low." During my quick tour of the shop, Liam points to the inventory in various rooms repeatedly stating, "all those, free of charge... all those, free of charge." Caleb and I go off to collect what others are discarding for free for valuable use at the house, Liam shares his van for free, and makes special effort to point out to me how much is

available for free at his shop, that is supposedly also for making money and for providing free food to those in need via bikes. This indicates just how much free-ness is valued. A commodity seems to be perhaps more valuable because it is free, it carries a moral value that expresses members' resourcefulness and particularly, the value of not engaging in monetary exchange as much as possible. The resourcefulness through reusing and repairing was not tied to environmental concerns in the members' reasoning for doing it. The reasoning was squarely placed on decreasing engagement in monetary exchange and new-ness. Free-ness and resourcefulness are valued and new-ness is even at times seen as of negative value.

As Caleb and I attempt to get going, he brings up that Caleb "owes [him] a half hour of labor," since Liam had to move a few bikes and some boxes somewhere. Caleb replies with a wry smile, "Ha, that took half an hour?" and Liam revises his initial statement of a few bikes to be more like 8 bikes. We walk out as Liam is still talking, but the tone for both of them stays smiling and friendly. Here, we have a money-free exchange of labor based on time as the unit of exchange rather than wage. Caleb asked Liam for labor time, which he did, and Liam is asserting a claim on Caleb's labor time in exchange. They debate the time spent and what value the labor has in that context, but in a joking, laughing manner rather than an exacting calculus. It doesn't even merit staying in the conversation and the friendly tone implies that they will work it out later, and it all eventually comes back around.

When I asked Fiona about her occupation, she describes her switch from a full-time call center job to 20 hours a week cleaning houses saying, "It was stressful, it just wasn't what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't want to turn on people's cell phones. I don't like working 40 hours a week." Fiona makes a conscious decision to value her own time more than a job she finds unpleasant and prefers manual labor rather than cubicle labor. However, this is not to make more money overall, but rather to spend less time working to earn the amount for her needs and wants.

Ashley does freelance copyediting work online, which she cites as preferable to other work because she doesn't have to interact with people much and she can make her own hours. Service industry work doesn't appeal to Ashley because she doesn't want to have to "look nice" for other people. Ashley has chosen her work specifically so that she can have more freedom of choice, not only over the work itself, but the way she presents her body as well.

Todd works at the downtown library and loves it. He says his former cabbie experience helps him deal with lots of different people, including those whose only place to be without being arrested for trespass or loitering is the library. Todd cites his skill in dealing with unpredictable social situations through work and values that skill. He is proud of his workplace and his role in an institution that is welcoming. He particularly mentions a prison sound installation that he was really proud of his library for hosting. This demonstrates that some Mirkwood members enjoy working their wage labor jobs and have a meaningful personal and ethical connection to that work.

When I interviewed Mel, she told me she works at a local shop on one of the main drags and wants more hours, in contrast to Fiona. She says, "It seems to be mostly up to them. The hours have slowed down, so I'm looking for a side job in the winter to make some cash to be able to do what I want to do." Mel points out her lack of power in her work situation, but not necessarily because she doesn't want a boss, but because the inability to work as much as she would like in order to make the amount of money she would like to make.

Other members work in the service industry as well, including Michael and Waylon. Waylon succeeded in getting a job screen-printing instead of his food service job while I was there, a job that includes working in some of his personal interests of art and music, viewing that as more meaningful and interesting than food service.

Mirkwood members have varying relationships to wage work. Some choose to work less and under less supervision. Some need to work more to "do what they want to do." Some value their wage work and are proud of associating with those institutions or fields. The common thread underlying the ability for many members to make preferable work decisions is that basic expenses for housing and food are drastically lower living in Mirkwood, with costs distributed, bulk buying power, and shared common spaces for use instead of individual housing units. Mirkwood is providing a space for experimentation as mentioned in the previous chapter, but also frees up resources to actually realize alternative values related to work in the present.

Working as an Elf of Mirkwood

Working at Mirkwood is often considered different from working at a conventional job, but Mirkwood is also different than many other co-ops. Flynn describes working at Mirkwood:

Mirk is more not as structured or organized. Yeah, organized but not like, not set like you have to do this and this and this. Just expected that you do something for the house. If you're good at doing something, you should do it for the house. It's more rebellious than other houses in the structure of activities and duties and stuff. I do what I can and if there is a work party scheduled I try to make it out. It will be a lot easier when I'm actually here.

Flynn contrasts Mirkwood to other co-ops in the network and others he knows about in terms of the structure of work within them. There are not set tasks, time charts, or chore wheels as in other houses. He uses the term "rebellious," implying the outsider status of Mirkwood in this and other aspects even within the co-op network. The "more anarchist" bent Todd described earlier comes out a bit here. Member Michael says he chose to leave another house in the network because of too strict work structures, also describing the Mirkwood style as more anarchistic. Flynn does describe a tacit expectation that members use whatever skills or resources they have for the house on some kind of regular basis. As the house was being fixed up in order for the city to provide our occupancy permit, "work parties" were scheduled for specific projects or general cleaning. Flynn tries to make it out to these work and play sessions, but because of non-occupancy, he is staying outside of town and can't always get to them. He is not punished or given less credit for that. The less-structured work system allows for members' differing circumstances, though it also allows for lack of participation.

Fiona has done a wide variety of work for Mirkwood house during her long tenure there and now as co-president of the larger network. She has done almost every treasurer job except for food treasurer. She has also done the jobs of obtaining house supplies as Spice Elf and Tea Elf (which are separate jobs) and has been a Membership Coordinator. More "professional" kinds of jobs with organizational house responsibilities were also mixed with regular housework. She says, "I've washed lots of dishes and cleaned a lot of bathrooms [laughing]". For Fiona, living at Mirkwood gives her the opportunity to enter into more professional roles, based on election by her peers, which would not be available in a more hierarchically structured workplace or organization, and not typical of her self-described class status. But that does not mean she is then above more physical or "dirty" tasks like regular cleaning, even though she also does this work for a living. Certain house responsibilities are defined roles and described (along with Elven title) using the word "job" and there is an intentional division of labor on one level, while a loose labor expectation for tasks such as cleaning prevails. Fiona is one person representing several occupational categories that she is able to go back and forth

between because of the less hierarchical or traditional credential-driven work of the co-op. Fiona is essentially able to perform multiple class roles, while maintaining a class cultural identity tied to the low-income level of Mirkwood house.

Caleb describes working at Mirkwood as putting work into a cause or living environment instead of money and says, "It's not necessarily cheaper [to live at Mirkwood] if you are a conscientious member. It's about time spent rather than money from a shitty job to buy a nice house." Caleb equates time and money here, but in a somewhat different way than the usual "time is money" axiom, which implies you need to be maximally productive with your time in order to make money. In this context, Caleb values spending more of his labor time for the house, where his work is benefitting others and himself more directly.

Todd doesn't feel like working on the house is really work. He says, "Working on the house is fun, lots of people around. It's not, like, a chore. I work until I feel like I want to stop working. You just do as much as you can. Mirkwood is in its own kind of bubble universe... everyone's got this cool work hard play hard thing. Like, let's just do a bunch of shit and get it done and then stay up until 2 am drinking and do it all again tomorrow." Todd overtly invokes the blurring of lines between work and play that happens at Mirkwood. He also corroborates the unique (within the network) Mirkwood value of less structured tasks. He loves that Mirkwood members can work hard and play hard and mix those two, while also feeling free to be their own judge of what they can contribute that day, which varies based on their own wage work circumstances and/or having children or not. Here, because it is directly for the house they are living in and importantly because it has a communal social element, working as a Mirkwood member is defined differently than wage work and is often mingled with play.

Caleb further describes this element of work at Mirkwood saying, "I like having 35 people around to do projects and socialize with. I'm on the Event Committee and so we get to organize lots of musical and cultural events at the house." Caleb enjoys working at Mirkwood because it often involves self-directed projects for the house with lots of people working together to provide enjoyment for everyone. He describes some of his more professional kinds of roles within the house that allow him to merge his interests and skills to benefit Mirkwood. He also has some future ideas for how to better manage and leverage work at the house and describes some of the struggles he's seen other co-ops fall into:

I really want us to look at ways of driving member rent down and food share money down through judicious use, like getting more donated food, doing more dumpster diving, growing our own food. In the larger network, I want us to not spend staff hours on things that members can do. That way we spend less money on staff and not have dependency on staff that leads to anti-democratic practices. Members should get paid directly or not pay rent, say, if you can build the deck for 8 hours a day in the summer. There are members that are really into living without money. We wouldn't want every member like that, but some are ideologically attracted to that, but just don't want to touch the \$500/month. But then there's the whole idea of being punished for not doing work at the house. The function of work jobs has gone awry in several co-ops. The very fact of putting one co-op member in an egalitarian co-op determining whether people have done their work job enough is touchy.

Caleb is interested in ways to reduce the monetary exchanges necessary for living at Mirkwood through different kinds of work. He prefers members have more direct roles in using their skills, or developing such skills, for their different communities rather than paying network staff members' wages to do those things for them. In exchange members would either be directly paid themselves through the collective budget or have reduced or no rent in exchange for that work. He notes that even though many members want to move towards non-monetary living, regular rent is a harder pill to swallow in that regard, it being a stable source of the collective income of the larger organization. Caleb then describes that placing a specific value on work is a hard thing to do and some cooperatives have tried to have a person in charge of making that judgment call. This has sometimes caused conflict and Caleb believes it goes against the egalitarian values of cooperative living. He continues, though, by reaffirming the importance of cooperative housing saying, "I think co-ops are important and going about them the way that we have has created something important. I'm not someone who really harps on about the unfairness of capitalism, which isn't to say that I don't believe it's unfair, but the feeling that I have about car payments and rent on other people's property, it feels different paying into something that you own, that you can control: things like the building being sold, and controlling rent increases." It makes a big difference to Caleb to engage in practices that allow him to have ownership and a direct influence on the fate of his housing.

The modified consensus process at Mirkwood house and the larger network ultimately decided the fate of Mirkwood itself. Members, who may have less control in their conventional work lives, have a direct impact on what happens in their house and to their housing security in general. They can and do work on a house that they own a share of and have not only a one person, one vote say in the governance of the larger

network, but a consensus say in the governance of their own house. They are doing the work of governance themselves and can run for professional-type roles and be accepted by their peers for such roles that they would not normally have access to outside the cooperative framework.

The way that this opportunity and ability for self-governance translates into working at Mirkwood is exemplified by what happened after a particularly intense, and for me discouraging, meeting. We were told by the city government for the third time, after having several “work parties” where we thought we successfully brought some things up to code, that we would still not be able to move in legally. After intense and sometimes heated exchanges about how to get these new demands from the city accomplished and expressions of deep frustration and discouragement, the meeting ended with the usual “check-outs,” everyone going around describing how they felt. Almost everyone described the meeting as a “good meeting,” which surprised me. For Mirkwood members, conflict and discouragement expressed didn’t necessarily translate into something negative. Furthermore, directly after the meeting broke up, without any collective decision or direction to do so, most attending began immediately tackling something on the house. Beers were opened, laughter could be heard, and people got to work. The practice of an open forum for the expression and negotiation of conflict and frustration did not result in animosity and a desire for members to leave the house space, or more importantly decide to no longer be a member of Mirkwood. It resulted in the urge to get together and work towards the goal of being able to legally occupy the house. But not just work. To play together while doing this. Grab a drink, cheers to the ridiculousness of the situation, “get shit done,” and socialize.

Work at Mirkwood takes on much different meanings than conventional wage-labor relations. The ability for members to make more choices about their work life because of the shared benefits of communal living forms subjects that demand more freedom of choice, control over their bodies, and less dependence on others to earn monetary compensation in favor of directly participating in exchanging benefits among one another.

Conclusion

Mirkwood members overtly address class differences through humor and open expression of hostility toward inequality and implied class others. They acknowledge in their discussion of the wage machine and piles of money that only certain people can

touch the very real Marxian class positions in terms of material resources that exist generally, while their interactions between one another and the fact that all those interacting are in the same housing situation and ostensibly low-income at the time, muddies the real distinctions between their own positions. Similarly, they deride Bourdieuan symbolic actions communicating class status as in the seat on the train (like the curtain separating first class and economy on a plane) and are affining with one another as on the same side of these divides, communicating this through their knowing humor together. They seem to also play with fixed notions of class identity itself. As they repeat practices in the experimental space of Mirkwood, they generate altered dispositions from which to operate by both subconsciously and consciously seeking to affine with one another in intentional community with a shared sense of class identification that defies traditional worker/owner or lower/upper distinctions. While Mirkwood members' discourse playfully glosses over their own differences from one another, the actual function and structure of the cooperative administrated through elected positions gives power over the very valuable collective real estate to those who would usually be relegated to narrowly defined blue-collar roles. In this, the larger co-op network makes more real the subversion of traditional class roles, actively taking steps to directly change class relations of power and particular worker identities within their own co-op world. The space of Mirkwood provides an operational and social context in which to play with Weberian experiences of class belonging and expected class roles. This serious outcome of their play with class roles puts in motion the enacting of other worlds, in which class expectations and power relations are altered.

When it comes to money, Mirkwood members hold common views of not accumulating or spending money on "things" but experiences, "vices" or playing, and trading more money for more time in community, socializing while contributing to the house via non-wage work. This is similar to how Millar describes Rio's catadores, as making a moral argument through spending money on enjoying life with each other in order to make and maintain important relationships as opposed to saving and accumulation for its own sake through more or certain types of work (Millar 2018:100). Mirkwood members depend on each other to meet some needs and desires directly, but also use some of the money they do make in wage work to buttress those relationships through reciprocity and mutual enjoyment. Thinking through Graeber's concept of value as patterns of action and being as congealed action, Mirkwood members could be said to reject money as the definition of their power to act by creating a social space where

their power to act is based not only on their accumulation of (at least enough) money, but on more direct forms of acting in concert with one another and their environment. They place a great deal of value on time and time spent working directly on the house and with their fellow members rather than spending more time making money to purchase goods and services. The replacement for more money comes in the form of both individual and collective action, sharing space, and exchanging labor directly whether that be through a kind of gift exchange or Mauss's even more open-ended total prestation. But they are still embedded in the need to accumulate some money since they operate within capitalist society and their own intentional community operates based on money, even while it purposefully creates more space for diverse economic practices (and some, like Mel, envision the total elimination of money as the ideal).

Mirkwood members often value less wage work for more work at the house, (which is itself sometimes characterized as work and sometimes not), outside of the wage labor exchange, which reaps immediate benefits in the experience of all house members. They seem to operate similarly to how Weber describes the attempt of early employers to incite workers to do more by paying them more, resulting in people working less because their needs and wants were met with less time working (Weber 2002: 23-24). By actively choosing to live in an intentional community that pools money for food, shares housing costs, and engages in other, non-monetary, forms of exchange, Mirkwood members are enacting Weeks' postwork imaginaries in their own practices that become possible to choose because of the existence of the intentional community. Further, Weeks' assertion that work has so much power because it forms the basis of much of our sociality is a helpful frame for highlighting how Mirkwood members create more space for alternatives. Mirkwood members have another kind of built-in sociality in the form of the intentional community. This means they can depend less on their wage work environment to provide for that most important aspect of a good life. Their social identities are partially formed by their association with an intentional community in general, and Mirkwood house specifically.

Mirkwood members could also be said to be actively practicing the subversion of the dichotomy between work and life as in Millar's concept of "forms of living" (2018). Mirkwood members do indeed work at and for the house and other members outside of wage relations and this is sometimes closer to a direct exchange and other times much more open-ended as in how Graeber describes Mauss's total prestation as open-ended reciprocity (2001:218). Importantly, though, the work at Mirkwood house isn't easily

defined as such, as work as opposed to leisure or enjoyment. It is sometimes seen as not only preferable work in comparison to wage-work, but also pleasurable in itself, breaking down the distinction between work and life.

Mirkwood members' awareness of class and alternative approaches to money and work create a collective social space for cultivating Gibson-Graham's new economic subjectivities that make other worlds thinkable and provide a way for Mirkwood members to continue to experiment and play with diverse community economic practices and different kinds of productive identities (2006). Mirkwood as an intentional community itself and part of a larger network overtly attempts to provide the social and economic infrastructure for diverse practices, constituting a liminal space in between mainstream capitalist forms of life and diverse economies. The fact that they do this quite playfully and employ humor helps to generate and maintain a sense of Turner's *communitas* in attempting different forms of life in relating to class, work, and money (2008). However, play and humor can also serve to elide important acknowledgement of differing power and privilege, as well as the real exclusions that intentional communities maintain.

Nevertheless, Mirkwood members are actively creating new patterns in which less alienated labor has more of a place and constitutes more of members powers to act in their worlds. This allows them more time to spend on creating Haraway's social web of "oddkin" that ultimately allows and serves to support subversions of mainstream class, money, and work concepts (2016). Mirkwood members' participation in diverse economic practices requires Bloch's work of mediation, between the reality of being embedded in contemporary capitalisms and the necessity of money and wage work, and an ideal of not being beholden to these forms (1986). The creation and affirmation of community experimentation represents another form of Kosnoski's "work of utopia" in that members are mediating between the realities of wage work and the ideals of more communistic and/or gift-like forms of exchange and less alienating work, while also being aware of the history of and continued existence of oppressive class structures (2011). Members' active choices, made possible in part by living in intentional community, assert a Weeksian utopian demand that directly demonstrates the actual construction of new realities (2011).

Chapter 5: Working and Playing with Value and Waste

We've just seen how Mirkwood members think about class, money, and work generally and some choices and practices that attempt to live out some of those beliefs. In this chapter, I will focus on specific and varied economic practices including bartering and time-banking, that are in play at Mirkwood house and the larger cooperative network. Bartering is the direct exchange of one good or service for another, while time-banking is a system in which work is traded using hours as currency. However, most apparent from my fieldwork is the meaningful ethic in Mirkwood house and other houses in the network focused on waste through repairing, reusing, and repurposing. Several members make money from these practices and one uses it as his sole form of monetary income as we saw in the previous chapter. Repairing, reusing, and repurposing is not a stated mission of the house, but is communicated through concrete practices that new members participate in maintaining. Members learn quickly to be on the lookout for valuable waste. Value is sometimes based on an explicit need, but often people gather things regardless of a particular future use. Because it is a large cooperative house, it is assumed that "someone will use it." Most members of Mirkwood place a high value on this kind of resourcefulness, skills related to repurposing, and particularly the willingness to eschew mainstream forms of consumption.

First, I will briefly look at related literature on concepts of value and waste. Then, I will explore how members' and others in the larger network engage in diverse forms of economic activity, practices that are sometimes lasting, and sometimes fleeting experiments. Finally, I will explore more deeply the particular practice of dumpster diving, which we briefly visited in the previous chapter, as emblematic of the social, physical, and personal nature of engaging in diverse economic practices in community and doing the work of utopia playfully.

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Returning to David Graeber's *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, but focusing now on value in general, he describes the concepts of economic value and sociological value as inherently linked, as evidenced by the way we use the word "value" itself interchangeably for both what we are willing to give up in material exchange and what we deem right or good (2001:1-2). Value is ultimately a form of human meaning-making as opposed to a fixed economic reality dictated by an autonomous market, forming a dynamic process where value is being made and unmade through human

action (Graeber draws extensively from Nancy Munn's work here). Culture, in shaping what is desirable and meaningful, and thus valuable, is not determinate, static, or totally constraining, it is created and can be recreated consciously by people intentionally forging new patterns, difficult though that may be (2001:59). Mirkwood members, through their patterns of repairing, reusing, and repurposing, are also re-valuing what others discard and thus asserting their ability and right to determine value itself.

In Joshua Reno's study of landfill workers in Michigan he explores how mass disposal of waste shapes those laborers and the rest of North American society. These laborers also scavenge from the landfill, sometimes just to use at the site, but sometimes to take home and use or remake, demonstrating a valuable skill. For Reno's interlocutors, scavenging at the landfill is discussed as "shopping" and "smelling the money," linking it to middle class desires, or perhaps more accurately enabling them to mediate their ambiguous class positions. Further, Reno describes work with "rubbish" as "underdetermined and so open to possibility, chance and power," particularly through what the Deleuzian concept of individuation, assigning a valuable identity to waste (Reno 2009:33-34). These challenges to the "biography of things," in the context of Mirkwood members' practices, become a challenge to members' own biographies as marginalized, or waste people as conventional capitalist values may deem them, and a subversive act of revaluing themselves as creative, powerful subjects.

Another of Kathleen Millar's projects in *Reclaiming the Discarded* is to reverse the narrative use of waste metaphor to describe those "left out" by contemporary capitalism, even when thinking about those working directly with waste, by thinking of what waste practices create rather than as a representation of scarcity and lack (2018:8). She argues that catadores' practices of revaluing and cultivating social relationships on Rio's dump disrupt concepts of capitalist value and cultivate new kinds of worker subjectivities that do not conform to traditional identification (Millar 2008). Similar to Millar's catadores, Mirkwood members' experience of waste or garbage turns out to be specific and negotiated, and particularly directly valuable as not only the objects themselves, but as a way to play with notions of what constitutes value in their lives, what constitutes a "good life" (Millar 2018:100-101). The practice of dumpster diving and eating dumpster food also serves to shape the identities of Mirkwood members as they act in unconventional ways to provide for themselves and each other, both materially and socially.

Determining Value

Part of the pull of living in a co-op for some members is the ability to use what otherwise would be wasted, to re-value things that others have de-valued. Caleb says, "One of the reasons I love living here is that we can handle like any surplus food. Like someone donates tons of cucumbers and cheese and we can make something." This highlights the pride that members feel in their way of life being able to absorb what is rejected by capitalist commodity streams, not unrelated to how we see Mirkwood members' pride of their home in including people who have felt rejected in some way. Caleb's expands on this theme as we wait out a city inspection threat at his parent's house, where I ask about all of the items in the backyard. After identifying the items, he says : "You know, rural people who have a bunch of shit in their yard aren't necessarily being ridiculous. They can use that old dilapidated trailer if their brother loses his job, you know? Or the spare parts from an old car to fix the newer car." He then describes someone he knew that was a mechanic and had lots of tools and would never drive a Prius because that's not "working-class self-sufficient." "What's efficient isn't buying a new car, but fixing the old ones and fixing all your family's stuff until you can't anymore."

Caleb is defending against the negative connotation of hoarding and the perception of rural people in particular for having seemingly random old junk in their yards. The middle-class ideal of a tidy lawn and landscaping is a value that perhaps is aspired to by some, but Caleb is asserting the value of keeping old things for potential important future use. He ties this to skills, elevating the items in these yards from seeming waste to items with potential in the expression of mechanical skill and helping out family. Further, he overtly references class values by tying this activity and resourcefulness to working-class values of self-sufficiency through collecting and keeping old things that may have passed their original function, but can be remade: re-valued through repair, reuse, and repurposing. Even further, the use of efficiency implies that working-class identified people and also rural poor who are derided for their practices, are actually much better at efficiency because of those practices, rather than supporting capitalist growth through buying new. This unveils the contradiction between the necessity for capitalist growth through new production and consumption and the avowed capitalist value of efficiency.

Ashley also recognizes and operates upon the value in free things that would otherwise be wasted and when we are deliberating what to buy with the furniture budget from insurance, she says "Since we can get furniture for free goddammit, let's use it for

instruments!” Here, Ashley might be proposing potentially committing insurance fraud, but she is trying to be most efficient with their limited resources in recovery after the fire. She knows they can get plenty of free furniture (Free Craigslist, from curbs at the end of university terms, etc.) and she’d rather use the money to purchase things less likely to be found in these streams that will bring enjoyment, providing arts and cultural resources for Mirkwood. The actual ability for them to pull this off isn’t the point, but rather the fact that members are constantly practicing re-valuing in order to maximize their resources, not just for necessity, but for pleasure.

But she also has her limits. Ashley isn’t as jazzed about any and everything available for free being taken to Mirkwood. She asks about the many 80s-era conference table chairs in the Great Room, where they have come from, and what’s being done with them. Caleb replies that Gil has brought them over from some old building that was throwing things out. Caleb further explains that Gil regularly goes and gets free stuff from Free Craigslist and he gets a tax break for then donating it to the larger co-op network because it is a non-profit. So, he ends up making money from this. Ashley says, “So he gives people things they don’t need to make a profit?” Caleb replies, “Yeah. Gil has tried hard to stay away from the dark side and it was a valiant fight, really. Gil makes like \$100,000 a year at an engineering job and will retire as soon as possible and just do this shit, I guess.” Todd responds, “Well, gaming the IRS isn’t evil, it’s just fair play.” Here, we have Ashley objecting to getting surplus items from Gil that no one asked for and Gil’s tax deduction scheme using the cooperative network. Caleb jokingly refers to “the dark side,” implying that Gil is using the cooperative for his own gain in a way that is perhaps a bit too capitalistic or at least less than proper cooperative behavior. Todd defends him by claiming it as “fair play” to get whatever tax deductions you can from the IRS, implying that taxation, and thus the state, isn’t inherently legitimate. Gil is playing a game with the cooperative as non-profit and the IRS as government entity and is loading cooperative members up with “things they don’t need.” However, we do end up needing those chairs for Thanksgiving and would not have had them but for Gil’s scheme, or would have had to spend time and labor getting others. So, the chairs that were once thought of as not needed or valuable ended up, like so many things, actually being of value for Thanksgiving dinner, an event that brought together not only Mirkwood members, but members from other houses, strengthening the bonds of the larger network.

However, the fact that Gil already allegedly makes a lot of money (whether that number is actually \$100,000, I don't know) through his engineering job (though he wears a limited set of holey clothes), makes his somewhat skinflint scheme perplexing, not to mention how he is allowed to be a member in the first place. His clothing choices reflect a non-identification with professionalism and his pursuit of this and other alternative economic practices is clearly of value for him in order to get out of even his well-paying regular job and exist outside of that kind of work regime. Gil plays two systems of value off of each other to generate monetary savings for himself. Here re-valuing items that would go to waste is part of a longer-term plan to work less over the course of a lifetime, rather than a habitual short-term consideration.

Overall, gathering for free items that others have discarded or keeping items past their original use as a regular, omnipresent practice illuminates not only the way Mirkwood members routinely revalue what has been discarded by others. There are also internal moral judgements and perhaps some disagreement about what is considered legitimate use and legitimate revaluing. This negotiation to define the bounds of operation for revaluing, of just where practices land on a moral spectrum, illustrates the dynamic nature of reuse, repairing, and repurposing at Mirkwood.

Experimenting with Diverse Economic Practices

Mirkwood members and others in the larger co-op network have dabbled in several non-monetary forms of exchange in the community including time banking, bartering, and even alternative currency via dumpster diving. Gil tells me a story of finding what he says was about 1500 peaches at a dumpster. He and his fellow diver each took half of that and he says, "Since there was so much, we tried to institute an inter-co-op currency system starting with the peaches and we put that out on the listservs and several transactions happened based on the peaches until it eventually faded out." This story exemplifies how inventive members of this community are in terms of seeing value and possibilities in what conventional capitalist flows identify as no longer valuable in themselves. Seeing peaches as currency, and actually enacting them as such, is a leap that can be made if you take a playful and inventive approach to not only waste, but ways of reorganizing how we get what we want and need, and this is possible as part of a larger social space that is actively receptive of experimentation.

Several members participate in informal bartering between themselves, like Michael who relates how he bartered massage work for sewing work, saving his favorite

jeans for another year or two from becoming waste. There is also the area's forum in an online bartering marketplace. Caleb says, "It basically became all these people trying to sell minimalist art for shit like dentistry," (laughter). He continues, "...or like someone selling reiki for another kind of reiki," (more laughter). Here, members make fun of this particular alternative economic practices' failures to really meet needs and wants and the people involved in their particular area and by extension themselves as well. The implication in this group conversation is that the "minimalist art" people and the reiki people are part of an "us," since many members participated in the system themselves. The humor and implied self-deprecation makes the failure of this method not a crushing blow to one aspect of their utopian project, but an acceptance of the willingness to actively engage and stretch the bounds of valuation itself, even if it doesn't always work out.

Exploring another diverse economic practice, Liam once operated a scheme of buying up other people's time bank hours, using them to pay his rent (which was allowed at one time) and to buy food at the local co-op grocery store, which also took time bank hours for a while. Gil says, "I guess that's kind of exactly what you want it to end up being for." Through a regionally organized time bank, Liam was able to, for a while, use time bank hours for basic needs like housing and food, exchanging money for time bank hours so those who needed cash had that currency rather than the currency of hours.

All of the above activities are examples of diverse economic practices, though they are not necessarily radical departures from the concept of money in general as seen by the temporary replacement of dollars with other forms of currency (the peaches or hours). As Graeber notes in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, barter itself, despite being the go-to imaginary precursor to currency, seems to only actually arise in societies already familiar with money of some kind (2011:29). However, these practices represent the willingness for Mirkwood and the larger cooperative network's members to experiment. The group takes collective delight in the sometimes-silly outcomes of attempts to do things differently, to create other worlds. Yet, this does not keep them from continuing to pursue alternatives to consumption and goods and services exchange. Rather, I argue the lightheartedness of these experiments makes it a form of play that is not only sometimes providing a practical need, but encouraging members to be creative and innovative through diverse economic practices.

Working and Playing Waste

Along with the other alternative economic practices discussed above, a particularly illustrative practice is dumpster diving. Not all Mirkwood members engage in dumpster diving, but the house and others in the larger network systematically use dumpster diving to provide food for themselves and all members eat dumpster-dived food. Some particularly interesting discussions of dumpster diving happened while congregating at the house after doing some more cleaning. Bonnie talks about her and her partner's adventures on what she calls the "Hippie Bus," handing out free food to homeless people all over the country, much which was gathered from dumpster diving. When I ask about her dumpster diving experience she says, "[This city] is the golden city for dumpster diving. The university has this thing called 'swap' where they just leave out thousands of dollars-worth of scientific equipment. You can get MRIs, centrifuges, crazy stuff. 'Hippie Christmas' is when people are moving out and they just leave shit in the trash." Bonnie mentions phones and tablets and computers. Todd mentions new shoes, a nice trombone in its case, a desk full of one-dollar bills. Bonnie also used to work for Caleb dumpster diving at Half Price Books and selling the collections on Amazon. She said she got \$500 a week doing that for around 20 hours a week, though she said it was boring. This woman is a dumpster diving and waste use professional. She, along with friends and partners, have employed dumpster diving as social service work and personal income generating activity via online (capitalist) markets. In Bonnie's and other members' experiences we have several entangled dynamics. Institutionally, we have businesses who are dumping mainly food, educational institutions getting rid of equipment, already second-hand capitalist markets being further culled to re-sell things online for personal income. In each of these contexts, Bonnie and others are disrupting a node in the waste stream for their own or others benefit.

A couple days later, Caleb decides to finally pick up an air compressor he's been eyeing, but it's gone by the time we get around to it. Caleb says, "It's my own fault, free money that I neglected to pick off of the ground." Here, Caleb makes NOT dumpster diving effectively a personal responsibility issue, taking on fault for a lost opportunity. Invoking a notion of "free money" is interesting in that the air compressor, regardless of if it works or not, is assumed as potentially income-generating for Caleb, based on his repair and reuse skills or savvy use of parts markets. An object that is waste to someone means money for Caleb. He directly associates waste and money, importantly, "free" money, money that he did not have to get hired to make via traditional wage work. Yet,

the responsibility he feels for not taking advantage (*wasting* the opportunity) of the air compressor implies again his recurring reference to concepts of efficiency and a sense of connection to an occupation he regularly engages in. It is tied to disrupting streams of waste for his own living, an occupation made possible by cooperative housing's reduction of the cost of living for members in general and a larger, wasteful society.

The first dumpster diving experience I had came close to Thanksgiving because we needed to get a lot of food for all those who would be spending the holiday at Mirkwood:

Todd and I hop in Caleb's car and pass the densely packed large Greek and co-op houses and wealthy residential streets mixed with urban retail and food spots. This fades into a wider road and more suburban environment with lots of parking lots and outlet developments. We pull into one of these and head to the back area where there are four dumpsters.

What is demonstrated here is that we must go out into suburbia in order to dumpster dive. This is because urban markets often lock their dumpsters and there would most likely be more eyes on the activity in a denser area. For example, a Trader Joe's recently opened up nearer by and it took only a few weeks for them to lock their dumpsters up after co-op members immediately began dumpster diving. Apparently, suburban shops do not always lock their dumpsters and so dumpster diving becomes a privilege in that only those with cars or a really solid way of carrying loads on bikes, perhaps, can realistically make effective use of these unlocked dumpsters. However, several members are able to participate without owning cars or bikes because the practice is a communal one and if one member has a car, then all have access to participation.

When we get to our first location, Caleb gets out and starts looking for boxes. Finding a few we get started diving for food. I see several things, bagged bread, onions, and other vegetables. Caleb says, "Generally stay away from leafy greens." We start picking up things at the front of the dumpster that we can reach. We grab a couple loaves of nice bread. We haul up bag after bag of limes and put them in the boxes, exclaiming how many of them there are and asking ourselves what we're going to do with them. I can't reach as far so I'm taking things from the front and from the other two and putting them in boxes. We are calling out each item we take and showing them to each other in turn for mutual approval or disapproval. Sometimes there is disagreement. I disdain the strawberry milks we find, but Caleb says someone will eat them and so we take them. I see a package of tomatoes farther up and say, "Oh, there's tomatoes, does

someone wanna boost me up?” Todd gives me a boost so I am leaning over the dumpster to grab the tomatoes. Caleb says, “I’ll just get in” and boosts himself up into the dumpster. I thought we would just get the top layer of stuff, but Caleb begins walking carefully to the center of the dumpster, pulling black bags which don’t appear to be anything we want aside to reveal more tossed food. We get mushrooms, lots of yogurt, potatoes, onions, bread, tomatoes, chips, and other things. Caleb hands me a pie and says, “So much for cooking for Thanksgiving” and I almost look at the ingredients, thinking for sure there will be a thousand and one, but don’t and put it in the overflowing box at my feet. More pies and then one that is kind of opened, a pumpkin pie broken at places. I say, “This one’s pretty opened” and Caleb replies “Not that opened,” so I put it with the others. He seems to be pretty discriminate about opened things, but this is an exception, apparently. Caleb makes a special warning note about the glass lights that are also in this dumpster saying, “Be careful with these, they shatter.” We come across three and carefully remove them to the ground to the side of the dumpster. We end up filling three small boxes and one big one, all to overflowing.

The veteran here is clearly more willing to get right into the dumpster than Todd or I and we both defer to Caleb’s value assessments. The philosophy of “if you collect it, someone will use it” comes back here when I protest against the strawberry milks as valuable and Caleb judges that we will take them anyways. I also question the value of the ready-made pies and particularly a fairly opened one, but again defer to the veteran. Through Caleb’s warning, I become aware of some of the dangers of dumpster diving and now know to look out for items such as the glass lights. I am getting a crash course in what is valuable and what is not and techniques to stay safe while diving. Todd and I defer to Caleb’s judgement, but also work to point out and sort items together.

We pull up to our second place, an Aldi discount grocery store. Caleb notes, “People used to make fun of anyone who did the Aldi because it was bad food. But it’s gotten better. I mean people who actually needed food to eat that came here would get made fun of.” I reply, “That’s fucked up.” Caleb again, “Yeah. But It’s gotten a lot better recently.” This instance shows a number of things. One, that despite being low-income co-ops, some are certainly not above, as we saw earlier, judging those deemed “below” them on the class scale. Two, that there are standards of value within dumpster-dived food itself. There is apparently a hierarchy of dumpster diving. Needing to do it and not being able to be as discriminatory has been seen by some in the community as lowly. Dumpster diving because you are eschewing mainstream consumption or as part

of co-op lifestyle is not, though members do not overtly state this distinction. Further, the association with dumpster food deemed less valuable makes this judgment possible through how different wasted food sources are valued.

We pull up to the back of the Aldi store where things are partially lit. There is one dumpster and we park close to that. I start looking around for boxes, now knowing that's what we need first. We head to the dumpster and I see headlights in my periphery. Caleb says, "Someone else is here, so..." a bit warily. The dumpster we open does indeed have food in it and we begin grabbing items. The other car slowly pulls up to the other side of the dumpster. We get a lot of packaged broccoli and Todd exclaims at some squash. This was one of the things we decided earlier we were looking for since it is particularly important for Thanksgiving. Clementines, English muffins, corn, one canned thing that's dented. Todd mentions concern about botulism when the can is brought up, but Caleb says that's if it's puffed up, so we take it. We find a whole turkey and Todd brings it up to show. He has gotten in the dumpster this time right away and I am holding Caleb's phone for a flashlight. But we immediately dismiss it after touching it because it is juicy and obviously not frozen. The other person comes up as we are digging and I wonder how this will go. He didn't leave just because we were there, so will there be competition or sharing or what? When he comes up he says, "Hey guys, anything good?" We say yes and show him a few things we've found. Caleb says, "Yeah...we're feeding like 20 people." The other person asks if we've tried the market we had just been to and we advise him accordingly, saying what we found and what we left. He just kind of hangs on the side and defers to our choices as we give him basically a fourth of what we pull out and inspect. We also hand him the things we already have plenty of. We don't stay as long here and leave after we have a couple piles. This person also leaves when we do as we all seem to have gotten the good stuff and says, "Happy Thanksgiving!" We return the greeting and say goodbye as we position our stuff in the trunk and head back.

Here, we see the quick exchange of knowledge and learning process between older and newer Mirkwood members. Todd and I take cues from Caleb, but Todd, as longer-term overall network member, takes more initiative before I do. We both learn the order of operations quickly in our haste to contribute and get the most of our dive. The process of determining value and safety occurs again. Then, we encounter a fellow dumpster-diver and what follows is a combination of sharing and claiming our share. We give him information and separate out the good things we find in equal measure. But

Caleb also makes sure to mention how many people we are dumpster diving for to justify our larger take. There is a sense of potential competition, but a friendly avoidance of it in verbal and non-verbal communication that send as message of fair-sharing, informed by declared need. We part on an affectionate note of well-wishing for the holiday.

On another dumpster diving trip, this time just for everyday consumption, the group determines that we need to stop for beer first, decide on music for the ride, and then head to the first stop. Bonnie and Joshua hop out and go up to the first dumpster and Caleb explains knowingly “That’s the box dumpster.” Since we already have boxes, everyone quickly joins us at the other dumpsters situated back to back. I go to the first one and Caleb uses a bike light to see what’s in there. It doesn’t look like anything, but Bonnie jumps right in to investigate, kicks a black bag and says, “There’s some stuff in there. This is something.” Caleb says to me speaking of Bonnie, “Brave warrior.” Joshua and Bonnie are both in now and work to open the bag. They throw it out for Todd and me to look through and put in the boxes at our feet. Another bag has lots of asparagus, a little wilted, but looking green enough. We find some leafy greens and Bonnie responds, “Kale, yeeaaaahhh.” There are packages of meat, which we toss aside, though Caleb and Bonnie say that there will probably be packages of bacon, which should be fine to eat. Here, the first priority is making this waste work fun, beer and the right music necessary. But it is also characterized by Caleb’s warrior comment as some kind of battle. A battle with what/whom? The waste itself? The concept of pollution that that entails? Who wins? I think we do, because we get a lot of great food for free. It also seems here that Bonnie overrides Caleb’s earlier general rule of avoiding greens. He defers to her expertise, showing that her dumpster diving experience outweighs his.

We’re going to Aldi next and Nala says, “There’s always good squash and stuff there,” solidifying the notion that Aldi is now acceptable and perhaps even preferable to dive from. She brings up other places and Caleb says, “There’s Jenny’s Market, but that’s a disgusting dumpster and you never get anything. Brennan’s is great, but now the manager sucks and I think he’s doing something shady because you go really late and there’s a bunch of people there.” Nala and Caleb’s conversation bandying about proper dumpster diving sites exhibits the accumulated and shared knowledge in the Mirkwood community about safer, more productive, or just more pleasant places to dive.

At Aldi, I’m one of the first out and get my phone light on to look in. Nala and I are standing looking over with our lights from the front of the dumpster. Again, Bonnie and Joshua, our waste warriors, hop in immediately and start going through items. Those of

us on the outside are grabbing things and looking them over for quality. We peek at what is in other people's hands and nod in agreement on items that look good, and sometimes dispute other items. The mutual approval or disapproval of things happens collectively, with everyone putting in two cents here and there, verbally or non-verbally. There are lots of cakes and donuts and sweet things, which are mostly tossed back to the back as not valuable. Some are taken, though, and Joshua says, "I had to get this [holding up a triple layer German chocolate cake], it looks so interesting," justifying his acceptance of a ready-made, sweet item. Nala makes it her job to point out avocados and we find four not even close to ripe ones. There is a whole bag of ground turkey packages and this goes to Caleb's deliberation. We take one, but the next one is too puffy, so that's no good. Some more which are a little puffy, but not too much are taken. We get about 5 packages of ground turkey this way. We start separating things into meat boxes and putting produce in one of the other boxes. There's lots of cauliflower and mushrooms. Caleb thinks we shouldn't take the iceberg lettuce and Joshua thinks it's fine. We end up getting one or two in compromise. Nala, Caleb, and I all exclaim when we see an acorn squash and make sure Bonnie sees it and grabs it.

In this episode, several things are happening. Bonnie and Joshua have been established as the ones who get all the way in the dumpster. Caleb is the main arbiter of quality, sometimes contending with Bonnie or Joshua. Todd, Nala, and I help find items and pack them into the boxes. An unspoken division of labor developed quite quickly and without verbal discussion. Those more quickly comfortable with proximity to the waste took on those roles and those who hung back took on others. In terms of assessing value, it is immediately apparent that the norm is that sweet, ready-made items are not prioritized as valuable. Meat is a bit tricky, but still valuable. Vegetables are the most valuable items for these Mirkwood members. The assessment is mostly on equal terms and done verbally and non-verbally with everyone there, but those with more experience dumpster diving get the last word on sensitive items.

At another dumpster, Nala starts picking out roses that have been tossed and this is her own little side project. She puts them to the side of the dumpster and as people are settling boxes into the car, she picks out the good ones and makes herself a little bouquet. "I love flowers," she says. The next stop is a Panera Bakery and Café and as we arrive around back to the dumpsters, we see an employee lugging a box out to the dumpster. We get out anyways to investigate as the employees are still closing. We don't come back with much from what the one employee just put out, but another

employee outside smoking a cigarette waves at us and Nala gives her a flower. As we begin to pull out, four employees come out of the back with three boxes full of bread. They yell, "Do you guys want some?" smiling and offering the boxes lifted outwards towards us. Nala and Bonnie exclaim "Wait, wait, wait!" to Caleb to stop pulling out and the employees help us settle the boxes in around the people in the van. We say thank you and wave at them. Todd sighs, "This is why I love people."

We pass by Burlington Coat Factory on our way to the last stop, which is Starbucks. Caleb asks, "Is Billie working? I think he's working." Todd calls and Billie has just gotten off work, so we pick him up and he joins us for the Starbucks stop. On our way, we're all talking and start eating some of our proceeds from the night. Once there, we leave the car door open with the music blaring. Nala is dancing with her remaining flowers around the dumpster. We only get a couple things from Starbucks, cookies and croissants, defying the earlier de-valuation of such items. Bonnie comes back saying, "got a bacon and egg sandwich," mouth full. Most of our mouths are full at this point. As we head back, Nala asks where else we could go. She names some place and Caleb snorts, "with a pig on a leash," and proceeds to describe his and Liam's scheme to get goats and take them to the dumpsters that they don't want to dive and raise the goats that way.

In these two scenes, the work of dumpster diving, the divisions of labor and quality control practices turn increasingly to enjoying the finds and having fun together and even with strangers. Nala's seemingly superfluous flower gathering becomes an offering of kindness to a Panera employee who then rounds up her colleagues and brings us three boxes full of gourmet bread. This brief example of reciprocity elicits Todd's expression of love for people, Mirk members and strangers included. During the dumpster outing we were also able to help another member get home from work without a long bus ride. Now with a rambling van full of food and people, the line between the work of dumpster diving and playing becomes blurred. We're eating and talking and singing, but still hashing out strategy and Caleb demonstrates the ever-present ethos of taking advantage of waste, even waste too gross to dive, in a somewhat real, somewhat joking scheme of raising goats.

We get back to Mirkwood and unload the boxes down to the kitchen, then start a fire in the fireplace upstairs as more members begin to trickle in to Mirkwood for the night. Caleb says, "Let's go process!" and so we join Bonnie and Joshua as they are washing and sorting vegetables from the boxes, spraying off packages with the sprayer

and sorting things. Caleb and I begin to look around the haphazard still packed up kitchen for good spices to use, rummaging through boxes. Todd and Bonnie start chopping vegetables on the big butcher-sized cutting board. I join Todd and Bonnie chopping and Bonnie says, "You know someone's had co-op experience when they just get in and start doing shit." My Pinocchio moment: I'm a real member! Todd says, "I love this. This is my element. This feels so good." I respond, "Yeah, just making food and working with people." Bonnie says, "Yeah, and Mirk is particularly just open and you feel comfortable here." Todd says, "My mental health is so much better, even not having the house running, just being part of this community. Like, I was living alone and was basically an alcoholic hermit and now I'm...an alcoholic socialite." (Laughter). We are listening to music, Joshua and Caleb are working on washing produce and cutting off bad parts. Caleb gets a bucket and declares, "Look! Compost! We will never throw away food scraps again! Henceforth!" Everyone cheers and laughs. We decide on a big stew. We chop and chop: zucchini, cucumber, mushrooms, squash, kale, asparagus, cauliflower. We still have much left after filling the large stew pot.

After the work and play of diving, we begin the work and play of preparing the food for safe consumption, both immediate and future. Bonnie remarks that I must have co-op experience since I just start helping and pop in and out of work tasks with others without hesitating and it is the moment I finally feel like a real member. This demonstrates further values around work, that working together at Mirkwood is an expected practice, but that cooperative living itself accustoms one to assuming working all together for a common goal as the norm, rather than asking if people want help or assuming they will do it individually. Todd remarks how much this practice helps him be mentally healthy (if not totally healthy) and the conversation, as so many at Mirkwood, turns to laughter. Music plays and wasting not even the dumpster dived food toss-offs is cause for celebration.

Todd puts on Bone Thugs and Harmony, a classic hip hop group from Cleveland, and we sing together. Nala joins in. We are all cooking and dancing in the kitchen together, at times checking on the progress of the stew, and asking each other what to add to make it tastier. Caleb sits down on the floor with his drink and his phone. I say, "Why don't you get a chair?" Joshua and I go get Gil's conference table chairs and end up filling the downstairs table with chairs all around. Everyone begins to gather there. Caleb is at one point oddly sprawled on the table and someone says, "You look like you're posing for a calendar on this table." We laugh and I say, "Men of cooperative

living.” Todd says, “The Men of Mirkwood calendar.” Several images are bandied about. Todd suggests an image of Mirkwood men dumpster diving naked, the dumpster coming up just so you can’t see their genitals. I offer someone immersed naked in overcooked lentil stew. Caleb says they did actually at one point think of commandeering a dumpster and turning it into a hot tub for Mirkwood. Lena gets home, joins the group, and everyone hugs her and says there’s dumpster stew on the way. The chairs are all set up and Bonnie says, “All the family’s here!”

The amount of work that happens in a short period of time as we “process” is made possible because all of us are working together. Not coordinated, not in a rush. The act of chopping masses of vegetables we just gathered together, evoked the value members place in this community and its impact on their health. For Todd, practices like chopping vegetables just dumpster dived to make a massive stew for the whole house makes all the difference in mental health and social functional well-being. The playful use of waste and the playful way of processing it made the industrial, unfinished kitchen space homey, cozy, and fun. The abundance left over after the massive stew was the image of the abundance felt that night as members worked and played together, made fun of themselves as co-ops, and the invocation of family, where no one was actual family. This undermines not only lines between work and play, but boundaries that constitute concepts of family, opening up new ways (perhaps polluting in what members consider a positive way) the supposed purity of these spheres in their practices with waste.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the diverse economic practices employed by Mirkwood members and others in the co-op network demonstrate how members grapple with value itself, how that contributes to their experience of self and community, and how it shapes norms of what constitutes a ‘good life.’ Graeber asserts, “...the ultimate freedom is not the freedom to create or accumulate value, but the freedom to decide (collectively or individually) what makes life worth living” (2001: 88). Power to make or have economic value does not provide real freedom, but rather the power to determine what is ultimately of value for meaningful existence. This is the kind of freedom Mirkwood members seek by operating as a formal collective in their cooperative house and network, but also in everyday relationships with money and work, and as we have just seen above, waste. Mirkwood members’ practices of reusing, repairing, and repurposing, working waste, and

experimenting with other forms of exchange are patterned actions asserting a power to determine value in things which seem at the end of their valuable life as commodities or without intrinsic value. By valuing free-ness, that is things without a monetary value directly attached to it, as a moral good, Mirkwood members are also asserting a social value of freedom itself that includes a less-constrained relationship to economic value.

Mirkwood members actively disrupt capitalist streams of consumption and destruction, while also employing capitalist markets and community skills to provide income and in-kind wealth for themselves in lieu of traditional wage work. Reno describes landfill employees' scavenging as "circumventing tacit norms of mass consumption...estrang[e] them from prevailing circuits of value creation and destruction (Reno 2016: 101-102). Mirkwood house relying partially on dumpster-dived food moves everyone in the house a little bit further from the necessity of waged work to provide for daily needs.

Further, Mirkwood members' practice of dumpster diving blurs the lines between work, play, and the necessities of life themselves. Dumpster diving is work, there are divisions of labor and assessments of value, physical lifting and jumping into waste places, washing and preparing dumpster food for cooking. But Mirkwood members make this work also a kind of play, overtly by dancing and joking together, which serves to strengthen the formal tie of official house membership into an affective one, but also in a deeper sense of playing with conventional forms of labor and consumption creating a habitus that "has the potential to create alternative socio-political worlds" (Millar 2008:28). Mirkwood members' use of waste, though not as extensive or central to their livelihoods as for the catadores, has similar effects in that dumpster diving affirms the affective ties in Mirkwood house through working waste and cultivating subjectivities that blur the lines between work and play. Returning to Millar's use of value focusing on desire and what constitutes a "good life," by seeing value in waste through their collective participation in the cooperative and through the act of assigning value itself negotiated together, Mirkwood members not only assert power over determinations of economic or material value, but also cultivate valuable relationships with one another. Members work and play together, providing for each other by re-valuing waste, but are also providing companionship, pleasure, and belonging through the practice of diving, processing, and eating.

As Mirkwood members re-value, experiment with exchange, and disrupt capitalist commodity streams they are enacting diverse economies that also form themselves into

different kinds of subjects, ones who may be more empowered, creative, and skillful in playing in the interstices of capitalist flows (Gibson-Graham 2006). These practices, done together in the liminal space that is the dumpster and with a playful disposition, serve to generate affective bonds, feelings of *communitas* that bolster individual's sense of well-being (Turner 2008). While directly working with waste, what many consider "dirt" or "pollution" a la Douglas (2002), Mirkwood members assert their nonconforming use of waste as they also celebrate each other as "outsiders." This constitutes what Kathi Weeks calls a utopian demand for post-work imaginaries through everyday practices (Weeks 2011). The work of re-valuing, making those leaps of creativity to experiment with diverse forms of exchange, and processing useful waste, as well as the social work that is done as part of these practices constitutes a "work of utopia" (Kosnoski 2011). Members are not only making a statement through their practices, but are enacting community economies in their cooperative that anticipate the reality of these practices as a viable means for providing for one another, creating a Front for the Not-Yet-Become (Bloch 1986). Members' diverse economic practices demonstrate not only re-valuing labor, time, or waste, but revaluing consumptive and productive norms, and in the process, themselves as actors with some power to play with and shape reality.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

At the end of my fieldwork, I drew and copied the outlines of the floor plans of the house and asked members to draw Mirkwood, place things in the rooms, whatever they felt was significant. I bought art supplies for everyone, but only the children used them. Perhaps, the adults were already constructing enough in real life. Maybe it was redundant to imagine on paper what they were imagining and creating in 3D. Now open, they have a full house with music shows, film screenings, and other social events. The imaginative and epic fantasy world constructed by Mirkwood members has given members an infrastructure for practicing diverse forms of life, blurring the lines between work, leisure, and living, and producing playful subjects intent on preserving and expanding their sphere of imaginative world-making materially.

As Elves of Mirkwood, these "oddkin," as Haraway might call them, maintain a sense of Turner's *communitas* by choosing to live in an intentionally different manner than that of the nuclear family or individualistic renter through a structured, but still liminal space that makes habitual, systematic use of practices that maintain community

(Haraway 2016, Turner 2008). Besides the everyday negotiations of living with many people, formal house meetings and larger cooperative network processes are forums for developing new competencies and new experiences individually and collectively. The modified consensus decision-making practiced means that members are directly engaging in deliberative democratic processes, forming a basis of experience from which to evaluate power relations in community and governance. Operating at Sargisson's "critical distance," while still being embedded in deeply flawed and oppressive systems, allows members to practice political change hyperlocally, in the here and now, informing potential expansion of those practices in other physical places and social worlds (2007).

Conversely, this distance inherently implies a measure of exclusion, both in those that are actually selected through membership to inhabit the house, and in the subcultural sphere maintained through this status (Joseph 2002). An underground venue called "The Crypt" operated by several members provides an example. Being an "underground" space means that its existence is not publicized, but known through mutual connections (which also means it can't possibly be underground forever). At one time, those "in the know" created distance between themselves and others by playing a prank. Using an online forum where locals seek information on parties and performances, members intentionally sowed misinformation identifying it as a similarly-named furniture store. Members claimed that several people went to the furniture store hoping to be part of the scene, laughing at them for falling for their ploy. This illustrates the gatekeeping of spaces that Mirkwood members also engage in, sometimes through play, as they create and maintain spaces, including some and not others.

The struggles of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging that take place in intentional communities was highlighted by a network-wide conflict going on during my fieldwork. Along with the "fight to save the house," which included an ultimately triumphant bid to prevent the sale of Mirkwood house instead of rebuilding, there was also a struggle in which several houses responded by rent-striking. Rent-striking houses banded together to demand changes in how the network structure and each of the houses approached internal sexism and racism. The origins of the conflict are different depending on who you ask. One member claimed that the conflict emerged in part because of the "fight to save the house," others claimed it started when one house just hadn't paid rent for a long time, and still other members asserted various specific and systemic instances of sexism and racism as the catalyst. What struck me at the time was the intensity with

which some members and houses as collectives, accused in way or another, each other of being not authentically anti-oppressive (similar to the conversation related about anarchists judging the purity of other anarchists). This debate and negotiation of authentically radical subjectivities highlights the on-the-ground, experiential form that often-abstracted concepts are actively grappled with in intentional communities and members' ability to directly enact and respond to these realities through their cooperative in the here and now. This conflict also emphasizes the imperfection of Mirkwood House and other intentional communities as utopian projects, with the still-internalized power relations permeating social movements, and the failures of any to be fully liberatory. As Kuhling notes, intentional communities often present a complex array of attitudes challenging some but also reaffirming other elements of the status quo (2004). Similarly, Sargisson's concept of critical distance does not necessarily extend to internalized sexism, classism, and racism, no matter what intellectual or political beliefs members may espouse or aspire to (2007).

However, these struggles also illuminate how Mirkwood members and others in the network, no matter what "side" they may be on in a conflict or the reality of imperfect liberation, are determined for their utopian projects to remain resilient. Instead of giving up, they demand of each other. And they play with each other. The liminality, that "wildness" that is the fertile ground in Turner's conception, exists through the inventive, playful, humorous way that members approach how to provide for each other and how they see themselves (2008). In addition, by sometimes making fun of themselves as the "wierdos," the "dirty little party house" or through stereotypes of being a "co-op" and their own creative experiments with diverse economic practices, members ensure that their utopian project isn't taken *too* seriously, meaning there is a measure of humility and a willingness to self-critique. This allows them to be more often in the realm of Nancy's "being-in-common," retaining their differences and being able to bear the conflicts those inevitably bring.

A major part of Mirkwood members' and members of the larger network's practices of "being-in-common" includes the creation and maintenance of community economies, defined by Gibson-Graham as "acknowledged space[s] of social interdependency and self-formation" where subjects engage in diverse, noncapitalist economic forms, in resistance to mainstream capitalist norms of exchange, work, and value (2006:166). As we've seen, Mirkwood members engage in shared housing and pooled money for household goods and food, but also bartering, time-banking, and

especially dumpster diving. Through community economic practices, members widen the space in their lives for non-monetary exchange, less-alienated and mutually beneficial labor, and for free-ness: re-valuing free waste-d commodities, re-valuing themselves beyond their role as workers and participating in the act of re-valuing itself as a form of freedom (Weeks 2011; Graeber 2001).

Community economic practices not only shift members' relationships to money, work, and waste, but also themselves and one another. In Gibson-Graham's discussion of economic subjects, they note Spinoza et al.: "history-making acts involve the emergence of 'disclosive spaces', that is, 'organized sets of practices for dealing with oneself, other people, and things, that produce a...web of meanings.'" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 127). Intentional communities including Mirkwood House and the larger cooperative network operate as physical and social spaces that purposely organize practices, implementing and experimenting with patterns of action, with the intent to create viable alternatives to the status quo (Graeber 2001). The practice of dumpster diving makes thinkable other non-normative ways of being for newly introduced Mirkwood members and reinforces (perhaps normalizes) these ways of being for veteran members. To look at a dumpster and see food for a 40-person house instead of an eyesore, conditions one to see possibility in what looks bereft of value or even negatively intrusive.

When thinking about Mirkwood members' use of and intimacy with waste, there are further implications to be drawn from Mary Douglas's notions of purity and pollution, and the subversive power of liminality discussed by Turner (Douglas 2002; Turner 2008). When dealing with waste, purity and pollution is overt, and the liminal nature of things in between a status of commodity and one of decomposed matter opens possibilities for Mirkwood members to assert or reassert alternative values. For Mirkwood members, the practice of dumpster diving in particular among other forms of revalorization, instead of being associated with impurity could be understood as part of a kind of purification. In the context of Mirkwood house and other houses in the network, the consumption of dumpster food is celebrated: members are purer anti-mainstream consumers by eating dumpster soup, despite the fact that the food is a capitalist production. Consuming waste can be read as part of purifying the self of the pollution of consumer capitalism, baptizing oneself in the purifying detritus of the dumpster. This is an embodied practice, not only in the physical labor and mixture with waste in the

dumpster, but the food waste-d and revalued literally becomes part of members' selves in the act of eating.

Certainly, dumpster diving or any other diverse economic practice doesn't actually make one pure, free of the taint of capitalism, just as being low-income doesn't make one on an equal playing field when it comes to class-based resources, racial privilege, or gendered norms. As Todd says, this a fantasy, that one can be totally outside of the dominant system. Todd's sentiment echoes Tsing's cautious approach to calling anything non-capitalist and dumpster diving itself could be seen as a way capitalism relies on the inventiveness of poor people to provide for themselves and each other in order to reproduce a docile workforce and avoid the moral demand for social services (Meuhlbach 2012; Tsing 2015). However, Mirkwood members use these practices as part of a larger system of diverse economic strategies to work less in the labor market and more directly with each other and for each other through the world they create and maintain as Mirkwood House.

Mirkwood members' community economic practices are admittedly small in the larger view of a world still dominated by capitalist production and destruction, but they have at least the advantage of being real. They do not pretend to be, and certainly are not, a unified front as a global Multitude creating the Common against Empire as in Hardt and Negri's broadly brushed world (1999-2009). As Gibson-Graham say, "If we wish to emphasize the *becoming* [their emphasis] of new and as yet unthought ways of economic being, we might focus on the multiple possibilities that emerge from the *inessential* [my emphasis] commonality of *negotiating* [my emphasis] our own implication in the existence of others" (Gibson-Graham 2006:88). Actually cultivating other worlds with "oddkin," in the gerund, rather than declaring the right-ness of a static thing, requires a commitment to process rather than product, as communities and as subjects. This does not preclude imperfection, conflict, or even failure, but instead emphasizes the undetermined nature of economic and social imaginaries. As Tsing notes, despite the reality of living in capitalist ruins, "We can still explore the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes—the edges of capitalist discipline, scalability and abandoned resource plantations. We can still catch the scent of the latent commons—" (Tsing 2015:282). These verges, where humans and non-humans are "working the edge," are also spaces for playing the edge, and playing quite literally, in order to create more space for creatively disrupting capitalist destruction and implementing community economies. Though the spread, and certainly the preponderance of, more equitable and

radically less destructive economic forms may seem distant or nearly impossible, perhaps all that is imaginative and prefigurative of change resides in this somewhat opaque, yet anticipatory conceptual space.

Bloch explores this opacity, asserting that it is an inherent part of anything we can call “present,” also affecting time adjacent to the existing moment (as it flies by). This is to say that the latent commons Tsing speaks of may have more (or less) potential than we think in the present, because the “nearness of now” means we are fundamentally limited in our ability to judge it (Bloch 1986:292). By taking Gibson-Graham’s “now, here” approach and the above reflection on the present, we can see how Mirkwood members, other intentional communities, and social movements in general reside in a conceptual space of indeterminacy, perhaps not only in the sense that there is an unknown outcome, but also an unknown *now*. Yet, they are nonetheless actively grappling in this space of the Front, to create other worlds, perhaps failing backward and forward along the way. As Mirkwood members deal with complex issues of social organization, systemic oppression, and economic experimentation they are negotiating the past, present, and future. Bloch’s “work of mediation” can aptly describe this real effort in utopian practice, seeking “ideal potentialities” but acting in the world of constraints (1986). This “work of utopia” includes the practice of mourning failures, those past and, importantly, present imperfect iterations of utopian projects (Kosnoski 2008).

A key way that Mirkwood members dealt with imperfections and failures like the “fight to save the house” and the multi-house rent-strike was to play, both in the sense of being creative and experimental and also in the very literal sense of having fun with each other despite external pressures and internal conflicts. This kind of playful disposition includes, following Malaby, a readiness to accept the contingency of any given situation, a readiness to improvise, and an ability to be an “agent within social processes,” though importantly constrained (Malaby 2008:211). However, this isn’t necessarily a conscious or obviously intentional cultivation, but one that happens as part of the dynamic of Mirkwood house, at least during my time there. Mirkwood members did not seem to be making themselves as a work of self-improvement toward a determined, individualistic ideal of being seriously playful, but were becoming-with one another as they negotiated seriously and playfully the contours of their utopian project. This is a kind of symposium, in the sense that Haraway uses Dempster’s term, as a collectively-produced affective environment, with distributed, and perhaps even quite fragmentary elements, with the “potential for surprising change” (2016:33).

Ortner's serious games concept is helpful in that it highlights this being shaped by and shaping that players engage in in a given game, in this case the game of collective living embedded and overlapping with the game of dominant capitalist modes (1996). In addition, the power and inequality that make Ortner's games serious also permeates intentional communities and we see that at play in multiple ways as the network of cooperate houses Mirkwood is a part of strives to work through past and present failures to become more inclusively utopian. However, I would like to regain and assert the importance of play in the literal sense as also significant in that shaping. Serious games can still incorporate lightness and play as an essential part of the game of power, as Mirkwood members do, using fantasy, imagination, and humor about themselves and the worlds they inhabit. This develops the ability to remain resilient over time, with diverse perspectives, negotiating tensions without getting mired in a sense of constant struggle, doing it as part of the work and play of life. The work of utopia they are engaged in is possible because they are playful, making and being made by their own collective game. Haraway notes, "Perhaps it is precisely in the realm of play, outside the dictates of teleology, settled categories, and function, that serious worldliness and recuperation become possible" (Haraway 2016: 23-24). The playful dispositions cultivated at Mirkwood house provide an effective (and affective) way to "stay with the trouble" of community and political economic realities, past, present, and future (Haraway 2016). This results in the creation of seriously playful subjects capable of long-term, enduring, dynamic experimentation and creation of other worlds, ones that make utopian projects not only possible, but pleasurable.

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